

CENTAUR OF GOD

By the same author

LEATHER-NOSE

CENTAUR OF GOD

by
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PART I.

'I hear His step, from star to star . . .

CHAPTER I

THE DE LA BARES

AMÉLIEN HORDON, Marquis de La Bare, had two legitimate sons. Of these, the elder responded to the name of Manfred, and doubtless the imaginative resources of the whole family had gone to his christening, for the other was simply Gaston, like his great-uncle. And if Manfred found his Christian name a little on the grandiloquent side, the Marquis would point out that it might have been worse.

'Think yourself lucky that I didn't have you baptized Childe Harold,' he would say. 'Uncle George would have been your godfather if he'd survived that silly Greek episode.'

For the de La Bares claimed descent from the Norman branch of the Gordons—of whom the ill-starred Byron had been the most famous figure.

'And if ever any one calls him "Fred",' muttered the Marquis, as he turned away from the font, 'he'll have me to reckon with.' No one being anxious to 'reckon with' the ferocious and powerful La Bare, Manfred his son remained.

And later, as a young man, his patronymic suited him well enough, though he was by no means the romantic figure you might have expected from it. On the contrary, his personality contrasted just sharply enough with the byronic type to excite interest. He kept that interest by reason of his calm, fair-haired strength. A certain stockiness and solidity gave him a somewhat intimidating aspect,

and his shoulders were those of a blacksmith. But the head above them was small and well shaped; the nose was a straight one, and the face had a touch of the feminine—it would have been even childlike if Manfred had smiled more often. But Manfred's smiles were brief, and rare enough.

Gaston, too, five years younger than his brother, had a small head; but in his case it was perched on a great bony frame. At sixteen, he stood a full six feet of dark whipcord—black as a churchyard crow. Manfred's milky fairness gave place, in his brother, to a sallow, bilious tint and a pimply complexion. When friends of the family saw them together, they called them 'The grape and the stalk'. For in Manfred the firm, rounded strength gave you the idea of full-sapped abundance, while his brother suggested only misdirected and unfruitful growth.

The servants, who as their standing diminished were beginning to lose the finer shades of respect, had their own nickname for them, 'The chipolata and his sausage'.

The thought of certain years, such as 1789 and 1830, will immediately evoke in the historian's mind a complete and colourful synthesis, a series of vivid pictures. Others—and among them the whole period from 1850 to 1870—are unfamiliar enough. Yet 1850, with all its complexities, is one of the strangest—and to the student of intellectual and psychological evolution one of the most characteristic—years of French history. 1850 brought the real revolution. That of 1789 was led by a dare-devil minority, whose enthusiasm swept along with them others who were passive, and often scandalized or bewildered. It took another fifty years for the mass of the people to learn to think as revolutionaries, that is, as individualists. This period marks, therefore, the separation of soul and State—both in the temporal domain, and, stranger still, in the spiritual. The ordinary man, the layman, now hopes to realize his own good outside the national good (such was the influence of the party system). And the Christian

obeys the impulses of his innermost conscience, without thought for tradition or royal allegiance: the abolition of the king's anointing, the bond uniting Church and State, had weakened the authority of both. Human beings are delivered up to the demon of solitude, whose other baleful name is 'Ego'.

Materialism, strengthening its hold, coarsens the ordinary man. Spirituality, unrestrained by any thought of duty to society, unbalances the religious man. Ridiculously or sublimely?

Gaston was awkward and shy, but it didn't matter: for Gaston was the younger. His mother's lands—she was from Brittany and owned a considerable property near Rennes—would be adequate provision for him, and Manfred would have La Bare, where he would carry on in his turn the peaceful feudal overlordship. A third child might have complicated matters.

Yet Gaston, if awkward, was by no means an ugly child. He had big, luminous deer's eyes, and at times they would gleam brighter still with some sudden infelicity or mute appeal. The vigour of an old race of country squires showed in his teeth—two faultless rows, close-set and brilliant, which a wide and flexible mouth uncovered when he smiled. And there were many who found these teeth, so white and strong and even—contrasting as they did with that physical weakness—a little disconcerting. He must have fifty-six at least! He wasn't normal—it made him almost a freak!

For ten years Manfred listened to his tutors with the politest attention, never interrupting them once; but when he was in his teens he knew little more than the 'three R's', and had a very limited vocabulary. Yet, on the other hand, such was his enthusiasm for history and genealogy that his knowledge of the medieval world was worthy of a Benedictine monk. His love for the past became so intense that towards the end of his short life he would never read the daily papers. They had to be already out-dated before

they could appeal to him; and thus he avoided that perpetually unstable state which is the present, and was able to hold on to the reality of the past.

And Gaston, poor child, went exploring the land of books with the ridiculous appetite of some petty official's boy, put to school in a humble seminary. He devoured everything. But after his enthusiasm had made him tremble and pale over a book, he could remember nothing of the contents—only the emotions it had aroused. Every tattered little book he could lay hands on was sacred to him. 'We ought to make a book stew for him,' the Marquis would mutter. 'What a little dry-as-dust you've presented me with, my poor Simone.' And yet, however, La Bare perceived that the times were changing, and it was not without a spark of pride that he would listen to the tutor while he praised Gaston's application, and even his compositions—but never his rep. For here, his shyness, his stammer and his muddle-headedness combined to make a considerable stumbling-block.

The tutor looked upon Gaston with tenderness as his spiritual son, while Manfred was, in a manner of speaking, an equal, and a rather disquieting equal, in whose very silences he was aware of the boy's powerful personality. When, at table, the young, fair athletic figure would recite with a casual facility the ramifications of the House of Jerusalem, the tutor would send a little glance of sympathy over to the open-mouthed Gaston.

But it must not be thought that the younger son was the butt of the household. A sort of Cinderella, yes, he might be—but only by his own wish.

Life ran smoothly in this household, where the art of living had been refined through the centuries, and a calm, detached benevolence included every one equally—saving, of course, the rights of the heir. Never, never would such a word as tenderness have been pronounced, although perhaps it was always understood. It was not that they were cold by nature or design—although there was the

military tradition to discourage the slightest effeminacy—but among these people, living as they were in the solitudes of the country, there was yet no small regard for style, for formality. They never quite ceased to be conscious of living in the public eye. From a race which had always enjoyed power and prestige, they had inherited the watchword, to remain calm; to let it be known that they would dominate the event, any event, always. They must behave in such a fashion that a stranger would never be embarrassed, either by their sorrows or their enthusiasms; so that they concealed their anxieties, their loves and their woes. Thus, a visitor would never find himself forced to take some sorrowful part in what concerned them alone. He could so easily slip into their manner, so easily adopt their own bearing, whether he were an inferior come to ask for help, or a superior bringing a favour.

The Marquis alone was a little disturbing. The violence of his nature, hold it in check as he might, he could not conceal; it would break out at times, and then his anger would exceed that code of level behaviour which had been so strongly established. With his whole body tense he would try to hold in that fury, beating below the tranquil surface—but only to explode, in a resounding ‘*Par exemple!*’—though the rest, thanks to his upbringing, would trail off in a voice growing lower and lower, and finally strangled. ‘My father was a Chouan, my mother a Chouanne. Chouannerie’s in my blood. A bad beginning’—such was his excuse. He was a posthumous son, born in 1800.

Politics, in any debatable form, hardly concerned La Bare; his household breathed an atmosphere of ardent legitimism, loyal in the extreme. The Marquis had been one of the last Chouans of France—in point of fact, the last but one; his great friend Louis de Bonnechose, who had fired the last shot for the king, died in 1832, at Montaigu, near Roche-sur-Yon, during a short absence on La Bare’s part. And Amélien bore a terrible grudge against

destiny for having cheated him of a similar end. He grumbled that death had missed him by about four hours.

Boisnormand was the *nom de guerre* of this Bonnechose (brother of the Cardinal) who had won the name of the 'young archangel of royalism'. He was born in 1811. The last decree ever signed by Charles X, on 1st August 1830, was one raising him from page to the rank of officer.

When the Duchess of Berry decided on her venture, the impetuous boy brought her the aid of all his friends, whom he dominated and inspired. La Bare went along too, gun in hand, and when the decisive moment came, at la Goyère, he remained his sole companion. Amélien went off to Tiffauges to gather a band of Chouans together, while Louis was resting in the old château, now a farm. Thanks to information given by a traitor, the soldiers of Louis Philippe surrounded the place at night. The farmers, however, Goureau by name, loyal, stout-hearted fellows that they were, warned Bonnechose of the danger. He fired and killed Corporal Ribail, and the second round from the enemy wounded him in the thigh. Nevertheless, he made his escape, and took a short respite in an old watch-tower, where he hid in order to dress his wound. He had almost gained the open country when a third volley struck him and laid him low. The farmer was dead, and his wounded wife wanted to take care of the Chouan. 'Go and look after your dead,' taunted the Blues; and they met with the heroic reply, 'I'd be better occupied with the living.' Bonnechose was taken to Montaigu and put under guard in the hospital.

This soon came to the ears of La Bare—and back he rushed, nearly killing his horse. With a new mount, he charged on, and, single-handed, braved like a madman a whole column of National Guards. He was soon overpowered and disarmed. These were not the soldiers who had captured his friends, but a company reconnoitring.

'I knew then that Chouannerie was dead. The officers came up to me so politely—politely, mind you! They were disgusted to have learned that Bonnechose had been

betrayed and was now a prisoner; and yet, there they were, marching on, in line with their new stupid cult of obedience—a meaningless cult—just something to cloak their cowardice! The army won't take sides! Well then, who will? But at least they let me have Louis's letters and his flag. . . . He died three days later.'

On the eve of his death, Sister Frouin was called to the parlour of the Hôtel-Dieu at Montaigu. She had hardly entered the room before she recognized the Marquis, though the light was dim enough. Her father had served the La Bares. She trembled, for the people of Montaigu would certainly not have spared him. He had come to make an attempt to rescue Bonnechose, and in this she would gladly have helped him, but the condition of the wounded man made any such hope futile. Amélien's despairing curses brought the rest of the nuns to the door. Not heeding them, he almost seized Sister Frouin by the throat. 'Swear to me he's done for! Swear it—on your crucifix!' She did as he asked her, and the Marquis rushed out blaspheming.

And of the gay young Louis de Bonnechose there remained nothing but a few white flags, no bigger than a lily petal, distributed as mementoes among his friends. They had been cut from his flag—the last royal cornette, the standard of the old monarchy. I think we have one of these fragments. General de Charette was proud of having another, at Basse-Motte. It is strange to reflect that our fathers knew these men, and that a mere century divides us from their murderous exploits and the savage tenacity of their devotion.

CHAPTER II

THE BLEEDING CHRIST

THE part played by religion in the La Bare château, where present and past mingled so inextricably, is something far more difficult to determine. Was it only as part and parcel of the royalist cause that it lived on? Or did it burn with a flame of its own?

There is no doubt that the Marquis was a good Christian, for there is evidence enough in the gifts he made, and in his respect for the ministers of the Roman Catholic Church and for its ceremonies. If La Bare happened to encounter, in the fields, a priest bearing the Host to a sick man, he would sink down on his knees in the clayey soil. He would give up his hunt, call off his dogs from the scent, and follow him, to kneel with the front rank of the mourners in some humble cottage. This flower of blue-blooded nobility would always be the first to greet the humblest little curate. And you would see the Marquis and the little fellow in black advancing towards each other, hat in hand, for fifteen paces, each courteously endeavouring to forestall the other.

Whether it were a good year or a bad there were always two or three farmers' sons studying at the seminary at La Bare's expense. 'There's another one turned out for the bad,' he would observe, not without a touch of malice, 'the Fortiers' eldest boy wants to be a priest.' But he would immediately go to the farm and see what could be done about having a little room set apart for him in the attics, so that the neophyte could undress in privacy. He would joke with him, until he appeared in his cassock, when the young man would be invited to his table. And then, to put the timid Levite at his ease, the Marquis would

bring into play all his tactful affability—so that even the kitchens could not but admire both the intention and the success. And the youth would take his departure, exalted in his own estimation and that of those around him, by the conviction that his priesthood had ennobled him, like a coronet.

La Bare took the Communion at Easter, but only at this statutory time. From Holy Wednesday onwards he would be in a devastating humour, which for all its silent concealment was evident in his lowered eyebrows and his bristling moustache. He was always communicated first, and alone; and he would go through with it with the air of one resigned to anything.

Did the Marquis really feel convinced that God was proper company for him? When some one once observed that Christ, though outwardly the son of a carpenter, and a carpenter Himself, had still taken good care to be born into one of the greatest houses in the world—the House of David—the Marquis had a ready reply: ‘Yes, perhaps you’re right. But He’s got mixed up with some queer company since.’

No humility laid its stranglehold upon him. He only confessed to the primate of Neustria, until Cardinal de Bonnechose came along to fill that position. Then he accepted the Bishop of Évreux.

Now Madame de La Bare, seventeen years younger than her lord, was by contrast a pious woman—with a piety that was natural, gracious, unquestioning and complete. The contrast she afforded to the Marquis was almost laughable. She went to mass every day, walking the two miles to the village church even in showery weather or frost. Mass was only said at the château on Sundays. And so, if her duties as a hostess did not prevent her, she would set out at dawn. During the first months of their marriage the Marquis had indignantly tried to persuade her to take a carriage. ‘No,’ came her reply, ‘the man would only start drinking in the village.’

When it really was raining too hard she would read the office in her oratory, realizing full well that if her husband knew her to be out in 'weather like that', he would be beside himself.

In the ordinary way she was gone exactly two hours and a half, and the Marquis would await her at the main gate, with the post in his hand—the *Univers*, the *Gazette de France*, and a few infrequent letters. Simone de La Bare, a tiny lively figure, now hidden, now revealed as she passed the trees of the avenue one by one, would arrive at last, rosy-cheeked after her walk, smiling, as if impregnated with youth and a new tender strength. The Marquis felt a deep respect for Simone.

And yet the tale went round that he wasn't above deceiving her; people smiled quietly and accused his 'brute nature'. To deceive Simone might have been some mark of indirect homage to the quality of his wife; the Marquis hid his baser instincts and satisfied them *in anima vili*, lest they should impair the veneration which was her due from him. Moreover, he would only deceive her with peasant girls—and here something is involved which only those of the soil will be able to understand—there were a few women, closely bound to the very furrows of the land, who could mean for him the touch and the embrace of the good earth itself—some dionysiac union with the earthly forces. He gathered these women into his arms like sheaves of corn.

Such 'errors' coincided—so it was said—with periods of worry and a sombre moodiness on La Bare's part. It was possible that his wife guessed. If she did, she only appeared the more smiling, with a touch of malicious sympathy in her manner which would evoke from her husband moments of dark-eyed distress. The good Madame de La Bare, staunch Christian as she was, still retained something of the eighteenth century.

Her piety, in fact, never obtruded; rather did she con-

ceal it. The outward and visible signs of her fervour, which was far greater than the fashionable woman's piety, were kept under lock and key in her little personal chapel. This had been a servant's apartment, adjacent to her own. It was panelled in a terrible mock-Gothic style, which yet helped to establish its sacred character, and contained a good many rarities, of which more later; but in the recessed entry stood book-shelves on which the mystics of every epoch jostled calf and morocco covers. No preacher but found his place here. Even the zealous works of amateurs, traced by the aid of the midnight oil; and the Marquise held in deep reverence a hundred broadsheets of manuscript bearing the title, 'Reflections upon Devotion, by a Norman Gentleman.' There, in a splendid eighteenth-century handwriting, a countryman of ancient stock, and some dim relative of the La Bares, has set out his ratiocinations. Was he a complacently verbose intellectual, or a monomaniac, or an heroic soul? To Madame de La Bare he was this last, and not a year passed but she would read through the old fellow's esoteric pages. Yet would she have changed her Amélien for any such fount of piety?

Manfred, arrived at man's estate, took the Communion no more frequently than his father—his feelings, no doubt, being equally tepid, though he showed none of the Marquis's reluctance and morose solemnity on such occasions. The traditional acceptance of the Faith, weakened by the influence of the encyclopædists on his father, was fully restored in Manfred. But it was not wise to complicate religious matters too much in front of him. As a dialectician the young dandy might be smooth and courteous, but he could prove himself on occasions disconcertingly independent in his arguments.

Manfred said his two prayers a day, and they were short ones. A 'Je vous salue, Marie' (no Latin, if it could possibly be avoided!), which his partly feminine personality made him pronounce tenderly enough; and a 'Notre

Père', which came more gravely from his lips. And to this last, following the hunter's habit, he added, after 'and give us our daily bread' the words, 'and a quarry to hunt.' No credo—useless, in his opinion, if not dangerous.

Come what might, he would always go to mass on a Sunday. When he was a little older, and Saturday night found him occupied in no Christian manner, he would tell his companion that he must leave her to go and worship God. There was no bravado in his words; they came naturally and dutifully. Manfred de La Bare was off to the *petit lever* of the monarch.

One day a friend remarked upon this apparent inconsistency. 'If I have yielded one of my fortresses,' came the calm reply, 'must I let the whole frontier go?'

At six years old, though he was not a good-looking child, Gaston aroused one's interest with his serious little face. There was something weak about him already, as he stood up so straight in his little petticoats—at least in those old, yellowing, ghostly photographs in which even the dead seem to die once more. Tense with the curiosity that every one inspired in him, so watchful, so attentive, that at first you were taken by surprise—and then, a little embarrassed, for there is something almost of reproof in that solemn gaze of a child. At an early age he had given impetuous proof of a 'zeal for God'. No fairy-tale could enthral him like the *Lives of the Saints*. And he was a great success in the linen-room, where the hagiographical hotch-potch he recited won the ears of all the maids. They would let their irons grow cold while they listened. Miracles and paradise and angels were to him a luminous world, filled with promises and joys assured, with nothing to inspire him with fear.

But before he was seven he was to know the grave and the tragic aspects of religion—and the revelation came about under strange circumstances.

Madame de La Bare was related to a powerful family of the bourgeoisie, which had given to Brittany its last prince-

bishop, and from him she had inherited a number of collector's pieces; they were the glory of her private oratory. Among them was one that seemed anything but a mere dead carving. In that secret chapel, dominating the altar, hung a carved Spanish Christ of the seventeenth century, three-quarters life-size, of glazed and painted wood; a terrifying picture of His martyrdom. This human body was nothing but a wound encompassing all the flayed and bleeding limbs, a scarred, bluish mass, veiled by a network of trickling blood with crimson-clotted nails. The tissues, torn out from the flesh, shone like mother-of-pearl; the crown of thorns had pierced one of the eyes. The lance-wound gaped.

Familiarity could never blunt the effect of this vivid figure. Every week Madame de La Bare, who tended the oratory with her own hands, would dust it with a piece of fine muslin, with all the pity and the loving devotion of a Saint Veronica. And in spite of herself she never ceased to be astonished when her muslin gathered nothing but a fine brownish dust. Her whole being expected blood and water to stain it.

When she began the familiar task, her mind might be on other things, but the art of that sculptor and painter was such that the young woman would suddenly turn pale at that ghastly contraction of the feet she had just touched. The left big toe was stiffly outstretched—in agony—while the other toes were bent back to the sole of the foot in a tetanus-like grip, corroded with black blood.

And on account of 'that', the Marquis himself never entered the oratory. The figure was so pitilessly cruel that it exasperated him: at night, he would not lie down at his wife's side without first having noisily shot the bolts of the door to the oratory and imprisoned the suffering form. He never went so far as to tell himself that the statue was in bad taste; there was no 'taste' for Amélien. A thing was simply either done or not done. Established custom settled any question; and to have a Bon Dieu like that was

not done. But, on the other hand, one certainly had to respect the religious opinions of one's wife—even if her practices were somewhat exaggerated; and the Marquis would enunciate, as if it were axiomatic, the phrase: 'In country families it is the women who preserve culture.'

It must be recorded that Simone de La Bare delayed showing this Christ to her younger son, lest the sight of it should too deeply affect him. But the child had long heard it spoken of. The chambermaids, having caught a hurried glimpse of it at times, went about in mortal fear of the image. They would gossip about it in the linen-room and assure each other that on Good Friday, at three o'clock, blood flowed from those wounds. If the curé was in the habit of coming on that day, most certainly it was to staunch the blood which he alone, who presided at mass, was privileged to touch. In reality, the priest was entertained on Good Fridays so that he might break his fast a little, and because no duties claimed him in the afternoon.

Madame de La Bare's reasoning was at fault; it would actually have been better to initiate Gaston while he was still very young. But in excuse she could cite the courteous indifference which Manfred has shown to it, his air of polite but definite reproof. The fair-haired little boy had pulled a face when his mother, after preparing him cautiously, had first taken him into her chapel. And so, on one joyously clear and sunny day, with all the windows open to the hymn of light from the park, she called Gaston.

'Now don't be afraid, mon Tonton——' she began.

But poor Tonton had fallen at her feet in a dead faint.

He regained consciousness in a state of nerves, his hands trembling like the wings of a wounded bird, and ever afterwards the dread chamber held for him an irresistible, breath-taking attraction. He was found once with his ear glued to the door, his forefinger raised, as if listening for a cry of pain. For some days the Marquis controlled

his fury. When at last it burst out, the Marquise for once held her own with a sharp reply: 'Well, my dear, the child is in the right, after all. And what about you? Is it just defiance, or don't you believe?'

And so it happened that a work of art, probably entirely æsthetic in its conception, a work wrought solely for the cruelly voluptuous satisfaction of the Spanish sculptor—for towards the end of the seventeenth century faith was tepid enough, a carving which had attracted the attention of a prelate, a connoisseur of such curiosities, now produced an effect at last, after so long. This work of art, created by one man close on two thousand miles away, and guarded by others for a period of two hundred years, for reasons wholly unconnected with its religious significance, now awakened in the little Norman child the full reality of the holy mystery of the Redemption, and imprinted it for ever upon his tender soul.

Gaston and Manfred would often sit at the end of the park, looking down on to the château of La Bare as it shone rosy in the sun. There was a simple dignity in the eleven windows of its façade and its steep roof; and with its centuries-old trophies, it was for Manfred the monument of his father's race, the assurance of its continued strength. But Gaston saw in it only a reliquary for the Crucified. For him the little chapel had become the very heart of the house, the source of its life.

CHAPTER III

THE SERVANTS

IN those days, the life of a child of good family—and a younger son especially—was often inseparable from that of the servants. Parents would go out a great deal, and entertain considerably, and the children took their places at table only after they were eight years old. Such a state of affairs was very satisfactory. One might fear that the little ones would pick up certain traits of vulgarity from constant contact with their inferiors. But it was as well, too, to place a certain confidence in that instinct, theirs by nature, which distinguished between what was accepted in the kitchens and in the drawing-room. A thoroughbred dog, though it may fawn upon the servants, instinctively and instantly knows the head of the house.

And thus the child became acquainted with a great organization from the bottom, and arrived at a life of command all the better prepared by having lived among those whose duty it was to obey. When he saw the servants at work, saw their industry and their discomfitures, his notion of power was very humanely tempered. Thenceforward he would always understand these simple folk. Thus, too, he came to comprehend realities—and to learn that life demands obedience from us all.

Moreover, since in houses like these the servants held their posts by heredity almost, the children became acquainted, through them, with the very spirit of the family; not, perhaps, its history, but, better still, its legend. For from these simple folk legend came in all the force of its ultimate truth. In short, the children were put through a very rational process of evolution; at first they were nothing more than little peasants.

In this miniature world Gaston's popularity was not untinged by a small measure of good-natured scorn. They were in no great hurry to serve his meals, while Manfred was always attended on bended knee. His slightest desire caused a stir among the maids, who would have gone to any lengths to please him: Monsieur Manfred was a real gentleman.

The verdict on Gaston in the kitchens ran: 'He'll be a priest, he will.' (Or sometimes 'a bishop'—but that was only in jest.) The child was never allowed to hear any comment of this nature. Not that any one feared its influence upon his future, but simply because it was rather insulting in so far as it suggested that he hadn't got it in him to remain a seigneur.

The Marquis was always anxious that the house should be kept full of servants. If they were noisy, it didn't bother him. The château was no vast affair, especially when compared with some of its neighbours: at Broglie the rooms opened on to a corridor a hundred and forty yards in length; at Blanc-Buisson three families could live comfortably without getting in one another's way. Amélien rather liked the din. Any complaint from his wife about the noise from the kitchen regions would be answered with the words: 'Contented servants—happy masters'—one of the many proverbs with which the Marquis's head was stocked. This 'countryman's wisdom' did not mean that he had given up thinking for himself. Each little dictum expressed his personal conviction, and was only pronounced after the speaker was assured, in his own mind, of the fitting truth of the terse and picturesque words.

La Barc's delight in having a goodly number of folk to serve him revealed the old military chieftain. He called them 'my troops'; perhaps he thought of them as 'my guards'. If any one objected, 'But here are all these people eating you out of house and home and just enjoying themselves', he would reply with gusto: 'Why not? There's

enough misery in the world already.' And, coming out with one more aphorism: 'Blessed is he whose house is full.'

He would declare, too, 'In certain stations, it's a duty to let oneself be robbed.' At which his wife, who gave half her own income away to charity, would protest, outraged in her peculiarly feminine sense of property.

Above the servants' quarters lived the 'pensioners'—a group of his uncle's old servants to whom the Marquis still paid their full wages. Until they had to take to their beds for good, they continued to figure in the general activity, collecting dead wood for the fires and sweeping the paths. They came in for Amélien's old clothes, his riding-coats, his jackets (for they were all tall men) and his hats; and so the park presented the odd spectacle of five or six marquises, each dressed in a fashion more outmoded than the next, strolling about with wheelbarrows or broom in hand.

But the château itself housed the strangest and most precious pensioner of all—an old woman, now fallen into second childhood—the mother of the head chambermaid. Every one—the Marquis included—called her '*Madame Lieurre*', not only to distinguish her from her daughter, who was just '*Lieurre*' or '*Ferline*' to the children, but as a mark of respect. La Bare was very appreciative of *Madame Lieurre*. One could not be too censorious. It was whispered that the late Marquis, Amélien's uncle, a typical member of this herculean and stormy race . . . well, *Madame Lieurre* had been very lovely. Her features still retained their classical purity of line and something of an imperious majesty. And if no one could recollect her husband, her three daughters were much admired.

In truth, these young women deserved admiration. They were tall and straight, and magnificent of hip and shoulder. They could just brush the lintels with their heads. And so alike they were, these three open, frank

and childlike faces, crowning tall, strong bodies, that they almost took your breath away.

Amélien would have given almost anything to keep this splendid group in the service of the La Bares—these Three Graces that might have carried Tamerlane's heart, as the Marquis de Sémerville put it; but the two eldest betrayed him—betrayed him doubly!—for they left the château for the arms of two opulent husbands, and on top of that went to live in a town. Only the youngest—by great good fortune the fairest of them all—sacrificed herself to stay and take care of her mother.

The others came back from time to time, and the Marquis would never let them go without a greeting. One evening found all three together in a dimly lit room, on their return from the funeral of a relative. La Bare, who had come to offer his consolations, entering suddenly, found the three lovely faces floating at the level of his own eyes (which usually had to look down when he was admiring a woman): the rest of their persons was lost, veiled in the darkness and their mourning clothes, but no funereal crape could extinguish the splendour of that skin and those blonde curls—and the Marquis fell back in astonishment, almost in fright. 'Ah!' he cried, a moment afterwards, 'the caryatides of Night! Manfred, come and see!'

Ferline was very gentle—a little slow in her movements, as if her majestic bearing weighed down upon her. Madame de La Bare must have known more than she seemed to; for, though so vivacious herself, she never showed the slightest impatience at the dreamy and silent manner in which Ferline performed her duties.

But their mother appealed to Gaston most of all. A visit to Madame Lieurre was the greatest treat you could have given the child. The old soul had in the past performed marvellous feats with her needle in the linen-room, reweaving rather than darning the fine heirloom linen.

And now that she was almost blind, there she would sit, darning the coarser sheets and towels—her fingers doing their own work and that of her eyes besides, for her sight was 'lost in tears'. Yet it seemed that as the physical power of those eyes diminished, the imagination behind them increased, so that what she saw in her mind held far more truth for her than the reality which lay round about. She would stay up in her room, which looked out over the main entrance, and whenever a carriage came up her superb head and those still, sombre eyes would appear above the pots of flowers upon the balustrade. At this, some visitors would frown in a little consternation. But La Bare would reassure them. 'That's only our madwoman,' he would say, 'and a brave soul she is!' The fact that he had a madwoman in his menagerie seemed to please him greatly. He was very amused on one occasion: the poor old creature, who would sometimes take to wandering about the house, had lost herself in the drawing-rooms. When the Marquis conducted her upstairs again, she smiled: 'Thank you, my pretty boy.' And the Marquis, at whose presence in such a situation any of the younger maids might have fainted away, was delighted.

Madame Lieurre could recognize Gaston by his voice. As soon as he appeared she would start on those tales of hers which enchanted the boy, and took him away from the everyday world into a new and exciting land. Like some strange old prophetess, she would point to the southern wing of the château across the courtyard: 'You know, my boy,' she would begin, wagging a suspicious finger, 'they've never come back, those folk that had that big house across the road. And they took away all those young girls who were learning German. It was a fine military school, too, they only had generals' daughters there. The head instructress used to wear a turban, with such a fine feather—so high. That was her room—yes, that one over there, with the green curtains . . .' and in reality the green curtains hid nothing more unfamiliar

than Manfred's room: but the wide-eyed child accepted the fantasy; and suddenly the house he knew so well became a pale and ghostly habitation, no longer his. It was delicious thus to find oneself on the brink of doubt, to vacillate on the borders of the unknown—to violate one's own natural perceptions.

'And those thirty young girls, what became of them, Madame Lieurre?' Gaston would query, in a low and cautious voice that was part of the slowly dwindling daylight and the grey landscape.

'They flew away, my little one,' the whispering voice continued. 'They flew away up into the lime-trees, all except one, the little one, and she was caught on a branch in blossom. And then, as they went up to her, she changed into a great nest of vipers, shining, glistening vipers——'

'Oh! Madame Lieurre!'

'Like a great ball of ink, my little one—and this ball, swelling up and shrinking like your heart when it beats, fell to the ground. And then it unwound. And all those black vipers spread out among the ferns like the compass points. They killed one, my dear, it had a gold tip to his tail, like a crown. . . .'

But at other times, when Gaston went to see her, he would find her stiffly erect in her chair, wrapped in a red-and-black shawl, a disdainful mummy which nothing he could say or do would animate. When he had asked her a question or two, each one more pleading than the last, and put in a gentler tone, the child would beat a hasty retreat.

One sultry evening, when a Sundayish apathy ruled the household and a dull hostility seemed to beleaguer him on all sides, Gaston, who had for the moment lost faith in every one but Madame Lieurre, went up to her little 'cell'.

'Good evening,' he smiled.

But the old woman did not even appear to hear him. She was counting on her fingers.

'Even, odd. Even, odd. Eat and drink. Drink and eat——'

'Well, Madame Lieurre, aren't you going to talk to me?'

'Even, odd. Even, odd. Eat and drink——'

'Old blockhead!' frowned the child, imitating his father's shrugged shoulders and his angry half-whisper.

The psalmody from the arm-chair ceased on the instant. An implacable silence came—opened, like a sudden gulf, between the old woman and the boy. Little Gaston felt on his face the wind of the abyss. He was filled with remorse, but to-day there was no evading the wrath to come; sometimes it is inescapable.

'I'm sorry, Madame Lieurre,' he stuttered. 'I—I didn't mean—just for fun—I——'

She cried out now:

'You're a La Bare! A child of the La Bares! Men of blood and passions! Enough said. The La Bares have ground out tears with rivers of tears! They're millers of misery. Go and grind with them, miller's son!'

Instantly came the little nobleman's reaction. He could not permit that tone.

'Please be quiet—please, Madame Lieurre. My father may be quick-tempered, but he's very, very kind (that was the verdict of the stables)—and Manfred—Manfred's ever so good!'

'Go and join them then. Get to the stables. This isn't your place here. Get out, or I'll kick you out.'

This was unforgivable. Gaston raised his head sternly; his little hand quivered dangerously before his face.

'I—I'll never come here again. Never, Madame Lieurre.'

'Get to the horses. An old saddle-cloth still stinks of the horse! The stable's the place for you.'

'Madame Lieurre! I shall tell Monsieur Amélien' (it was thus that the old woman, the only person left to do so now, referred to the Marquis).

She pulled herself up in her anger; and after a pensive moment, in a high, thin, fluting voice:

'Poor little Amélien. Ah! La, la! His marriage was a sad mistake.'

'You horrible woman!' Gaston exploded. 'You beast! Witch! If you say that again about mummy, I'll—I'll——'

The two of them, the one so young, the other so old, were caught up in the same whirlwind of anger. Old Madame Lieurre shook her fist in the boy's peering face.

'Get back to the stables. You're no better than the rest of them. Horses first, and then the girls—like all the La Bares. Get to 'em both. Get out!'

CHAPTER IV

WHEN NOTHING HAPPENED

FIVE years' difference in age between two children can often seem a wide gulf.

Manfred was taken everywhere by a father who, consciously or unconsciously, was preparing for his successor's reign. He saw wood being marketed and horses sold. And Gaston, though at a later date he was to show his mettle as a fine countryman, had no part in all this. In point of fact, the task of coming to grips with the world kept him well occupied.

The world around was for him something astir with mystery. He could perceive nothing in its simple objectivity; his investigations, always emotional, produced for him such varied results. And even the things with which he thought he was familiar changed with the seasons, and with the hours of the day.

He would look out over that tirelessly cultivated plain which was to him the open country, shimmering on the eastern horizon in the August sunlight, and its great boundlessness filled him with some sort of distress—this great stretch of land disturbed his heart. It seemed to embrace him in a clasp that was something near to despair. And yet, for all this sadness, the plain allured him. It challenged him to pit his strength against it, to conquer it. He wanted to feel it around him. And at those moments, followed by his nurse, Gaston would advance straight across the rough stubble-fields, to be swallowed up in that gleaming light thrown from earth to sky and back again.

Then the little fellow would install his nurse behind a corn stook and stand in the centre of this great basin, his

brain reeling as he imagined himself its very pivot—and its axis, for it seemed to him that the whole of this wide, shallow concavity was swaying around his tiny self.

Lost in wonder, he looked up to the great clouds. Around him swelled their massed whiteness. High above him, at the zenith, his gaze seemed to comb their frayed threads, and the blue between their ragged edges shone the deeper, as if within it seethed a living swarm of atoms. There lay God, and the unblinking eye of the Three in One. And as he turned his head, Gaston felt conscious of the unending quality of that nothingness: it curved above him like a roof, and there he stood between two shells, a tiny particle caught in the bivalve of the bare fields and loaded skies.

And with a feeling of content, in which disquiet was mingled, the child came to feel that all this only existed because he had seen it—because of his own consciousness. Would this part of the world have existed without his contemplation of it? And he felt that he must love the world so that it might live on. Through him, the world existed; the life of the world was invested in him. And his heart overflowed with pity for that great plain—his country.

In the summer there were friends everywhere—sure friends, not bewildering humans but the birds: the strutting magpies in their black-and-white satin, the rougher-feathered jays—‘Jacky Jay’ with his foolish airs—and that golden dust-cloud of sparrows, flying away in troops, like smoke from the stubble.

There were miracles, too; every grain of wheat revealed at its base the likeness of the Holy Face, as if Christ had made His sign upon it—the plant of the sacrifice. The nuts always ripened for the feast of Saint Lawrence, who endured a fire of hazelwood as he lay on his gridiron. The dull blue sloes, misted with rime, bore a glazed ‘M’ of dark sapphire—for were they not always ready on the feast of Saint Mary? If he cut a fern stem slantwise the

watery stalk was emblazoned with the eagle of Charlemagne, who loved ferns so well.

All this lore the child learned from his little peasant friends. He tasted the wild berries fearlessly, and no dread of hemlock such as his town cousins would have felt made him afraid to pull the wild carrot; he delighted in the strange cold taste of that root as it springs from the warm earth. And thus when he gathered the ears of wheat, hips or black-berries, he partook of some communion with the earth; sensuous it might be, but his spirit was in it too.

When, after these delights, he lay down on the hard, stubbly ground, he felt the great warmth under him. He could not believe Célie when she told him that the fires of hell lay beneath, and that at night a thousand devils would spring up through the marl-pits. For a moment, indeed, his joyful trust in the countryside wavered in something like agony, and his spirit darkened in terror of the night—a night made blacker still by those devilish wings fluttering upwards through the shafts in the earth.

‘Célie! Are you sure?’

‘Why, yes, Master Gaston. That’s why the marldiggers always put Saint Andrew’s crosses near the pits.’

It was the 1st of November: all the family was present at Vespers for the Dead. The hymns thundered through the church, which was filled with a host of villagers garbed in black, howling in unison, as if their grief were inconsolable and the dead had but now been freshly torn from them. And the November storm-wind—the ‘Death Wind’—caught up their ululations, carried them over the village roofs into the great grey countryside, where the mournful thunder that filled the church died away to a thin and ghostly chant and mingled with the murmur of the lashing trees and the pattering of their leaves.

The La Bares returned from Vespers in a closed carriage. Gaston was standing up, his little face glued to the window. The others were silent, perhaps with awakened thoughts

of those that death had taken from them. The child felt the sting of the wind on his cheek as it swept up from under the coach. And his eyes searched the vast plain to the horizons where day was already fading.

The road wound on before them, paler than the fallow fields, and in the far distance a dark clump of firs hid the château of La Bare—a black mass beyond which the skirts of the forest and the thickets withdrew infinitely far off. Then a red-cloaked figure came into view.

‘Oh—there’s Célie. Can I walk back with her?’

Again that impatience for the countryside—for the very touch of it. His mother thought that Gaston looked rather pale: he must have been shivering all the while in the church. She took up the speaking-tube, and the carriage came to a standstill beside Célie. The girl thought for a moment that she was to be invited inside, but pleasantly concealed her disappointment when Gaston jumped out. Every one smiled at her, and the carriage moved off again.

‘Célie, how pretty you look!’ said the boy.

The peasant girl was wearing her Sunday best; the tall coiffe that swayed in the wind, her Indian shawl, and a chain round her neck with a Saint-Esprit. She saw herself reflected in the little boy’s admiring eyes—as if in two tiny but faithful mirrors.

Yes, she was pretty. For everything which went through the gates of La Bare, man or beast, was the best of its kind. And she, fresh in her young strength, could boast that firm, fragrant flesh polished to an almost metallic sheen, like a Normandy apple, which her native costume, only worn for high days and holidays, set off to perfection.

‘Why didn’t you want to stay in the carriage? We should have got back ever so quickly . . .’

Gaston did not answer. Taking her warm, silk-mittened hand, he drew her on in silence.

The wind brought with it the sound of bells—long tolling notes which dropped slowly one by one. The

great All-Hallowtide wind carried with it each solemn knell, and the whole air was vibrant. Sudden gusts swept them to the ear, or as suddenly extinguished them—the clamour would rise in violence, and die. The whole countryside seemed to be mourning with an instinctive piety. The bells seemed to ring out from the low scudding clouds; they would pour down a shower of notes and hurry on. And the child thought of all the dead who lay around the churches, sinking slowly deeper and deeper into the earth—of that vast legion of folk, who, if this were the resurrection sounding, would spring up out of their clay.

He and Célie walked on: before them lay a hole torn in the sky, the cloud edges stained with sulphurous yellow. The summer had been very dry; pasture and ploughland merged into the same charred, reddish tint that held the wan light. Three partridges got up—all that were left of a flock. The child wanted to take the footpath across the fields. The girl hesitated for a moment before joining him. Their footsteps fell in silence upon the soft earth. They were heading now for an island of trees, from which rose the clamour of the winds.

And there seemed to lie the very fountain-head of solitude—that source of enchanting pain.

The plain swelled up into a great smooth mound. Dominating it stood a bent iron cross. The black form, when you discerned it first as the path twisted, stood out gauntly against the yellow sunset clouds. Gaston knew it well, and had been waiting for it. Sometimes the cross haunted his dreams. The reason why it should have been set up here was never known. According to some it commemorated a death—a murder or an accident. Others would have liked to think it sanctified the plain. The footpath ran close beneath it.

Célie and Gaston automatically fixed their eyes on this cross, which sagged pathetically, as if in defeat. Many times it had been erected anew, but never to remain upright. Still it hung with a wounded droop against the plain which lay behind it and that riven sky.

The clay thrown up from the cart-tracks in winter had been baked in the sun until it was as hard and as slippery as ice; but now it was soft and almost warm, with a good earthy smell, for the north-west wind—the sea wind—had come back. And after such boisterous days there would soon be rain. The approaching rain excited the child like a promise and a threat at once. His little peasant body was waiting for the grateful drops that the wind foretold in the bells it brought from Lieuvain. But the great dark clouds and the first dusk of night weighed heavy on his heart.

Suddenly, over the soft crest of the hillock, something stirred—a vague silhouette, presently seen to be a man, outlined against the fading light—a capped figure, his smock blowing in the wind. He was carrying something under each arm. When he was almost at the cross and the parting of the footpaths, he stopped and glanced towards the child and Célie. True, they were still far enough off from him, but the red shawl could be seen at a good distance.

The man was very tall. He stood watching them. He put down what he was carrying upon the pedestal of the cross. Célie stopped and picked up a huge stone, and Gaston gathered two sharp, heavy flints. Then the girl went on firmly, a little faster. But though Gaston clung to his stones, she soon dropped her improvised weapon. 'It's all right,' she murmured, 'it's only Fervacques, the carpenter.'

'Bonjour, Monsieur, M'selle,'—the joiner spoke without removing his cap. So he had recognized them. But as he stood there between them and the cross, he seemed a little embarrassed.

'I was looking for Cour-Polet,' he went on, 'but this plain's as difficult as a wood to find your way about in.'

Célie smiled.

'So it seems, Monsieur Fervacques—you're going in just the opposite direction. Come along with us; we'll put you on the right road. It's getting dark.'

'So 'tis.' It was not without an effort that the old man spoke. At last he shrugged his shoulders, and, with one more glance at the child, turned round, revealing the things he had been hiding. . . .

Gaston and Célie gave a faint cry; in that thicker darkness, upon the stone base of the cross, lay two little coffins.

'God save us!' exclaimed the girl, her two hands clasped before her mouth.

Gaston, very pale, clung to her side.

'Haven't you heard what's happened?'

'No.'

Célie was returning from her mother's, where she had been for the last three days. The calamity was one which Gaston had not been allowed to hear of. The old man told them now.

In the autumn the dead vegetation is heaped up and burnt in the fields, sending clouds of smoke up to the sky and besmirching the whole countryside. In their play, two little girls had run too close to one of these fires, and the flames had caught their long flannelette dresses. . . .

The joiner picked up his terrible burden and all three moved on: Gaston in front, then Célie, and the old man behind. Gaston's teeth were chattering—these two little girls were dead—dead. And the child knew a fearful consternation, was burning with questions and anxieties. Four days before, he had met them, shy, laughing creatures, following a wagon-load of faggots out of the wood. Now—they weren't, any more. And a little of himself too had died with them, had pierced the outermost fringe of that great mystery of death.

The tolling deepened, the heavy notes floated vibrant through the air. So they would go on all night. Among them the great bell of Broglie, the 'Maréchale', bellowed out its cry; all the countryside was weeping for those two little girls who were dead—dead. . . . Who were no longer running about on their little bare, pale bronze feet, who would shyly blush and drop their eyes no longer. And even through the sound of the bells, Gaston could

hear behind him the old man's steps—even to the scratching of twigs and brambles against the two coffins as the man brushed past with his awkward burden. How hollow they sounded! And Gaston wanted to hurry on, as if Death itself were behind him—that swiftly hurrying, triumphant Death he had seen portrayed in old pictures. But perhaps, even if he tried, he wouldn't be able to run—he'd be held back, as in a nightmare. . . .

He saw himself as one tiny living grain—lost in the wilderness of the past and the unknown. Even to God he was lost, without trace. He tried to pray, but could not. The disquieting thought of those little corpses broke in upon his prayer. The coffins, indeed, were empty, but soon they would hold something which had been life. Life—one terrible instant in eternity, one minute vouchsafed from its dark and mysterious progress! If it were Gaston who'd died—yes, they would have brought another little coffin across the plain. Even on a Sunday; and all the world would have been as sad. The thought of his mother's sorrow brought quiet and relentless tears. Célie could guess that he was crying and she caught him up. She turned round to the man following; he understood—nodded, and stopped. He stood there in the darkening night, his two arms curved round his burdens, until the others were far enough ahead. Then he went on.

And summer returned; lengthening days, pale and hesitant at first, followed on the endless nights. Childhood is not remembered day by day, the sequence is blurred and mingled, it becomes an alternation of dark and sunny patches—memories brought to life only by the chance of a once-familiar scent, or light, or song. For what is childhood but a forgotten journey?

Gaston was now beginning to grow up. He was taken on longer expeditions, and often—a joy that was constantly new—to the river. To a child of the plateau, with only its dead ponds, the water here was a living thing.

Its quivering pools were his delight. And Célie would sing:

'God gave us water,
The fountains and streams,
The river that sparkles,
The broad lake that gleams.
So for each winding river,
And all gushing springs,
Let us thank God the giver,
For the joy He brings.'

Gaston would take up the words and dance about in the sandy shallows—a little cavalier drunk with joy. His red socks had disappeared many months ago, and he wore little breeches now, but alas, they had only one pocket! He would wade farther in, stirring up the soft warm mud and lumps of clay. The metallic tickle of flies and the whir of dragonfly wings brushed his cheeks, while minnows scudded past his toes. Flights of kingfishers, like blue lightning, darted from the feathery green cloud that is a willow tree in spring. 'God gave us water!' A grey heron would start up, offended, and with mechanical deliberation take flight—folding his neck on to his back, his feet into his side, spreading the endless stretch of his sails. . . . Little Gaston would clap his hands, apostrophizing the bird: 'God gave us water'—and then, improvising for himself: 'And I give it to you, all for you,' caught up in the joy of the rhythm and the rhymes, and beginning again, more lyrically still, with a sudden surge of inspiration: 'Why fly you up so high, oh, villain of the sky!—you silly great big thing—with a poker through your wing!' And then he'd collapse in laughter into Célie's lap—and Célie would join in, while above her head she brandished her shining knitting-needles so that they should not hurt him.

If Gaston grew tired, or low-spirited—for he was a prey to sudden gusts of melancholy—Célie roused him gaily. Tired with sitting still, she would shake herself like a young animal. 'Let's dance, Gaston! Sing "Vive le Roi, la Reine!" Eh? Give me your hand for a polka!'

The tune would have set a cripple dancing. And there, on the grassy bank, they'd strike into a rhythm which delighted the boy. Both kicking high and stamping with gusto, yelling:

'Long live the King and Queen,
Three cavaliers of Brittany . . .
Long live the Bourbon Kings!'

But Célie knew other songs besides these, tunes which could plunge Gaston into a tender melancholy which he loved. The airs of old France, sad but with a fine male note of sadness, were now being slowly forgotten; to replace them came songs from the towns and their insidious café concerts. How moving were some of these plaintive airs! One of them more than all the rest—'Sous les Roses.' The tragedy, from the first touching rendezvous to the beloved's tomb, with petals falling like tears, was strewn all the way with the scent of red roses.

'Sous les ro-o-seu,'

came the last bar, a cry from the heart, falling and rising again. It brought tears to Gaston's eyes. The young woman, justly proud of her success, would tell him that she had made Madame de Sanriveul cry once, at a wedding, by singing 'Sous les Roses.' No one ever knew who this good lady might have been. Gaston thought she must be some great personage, far higher and mightier than the duchesse de Clermont-Tonnere—and he hardly dared breathe in *her* presence!

Gaston, on whom this song had made the profoundest of impressions, persuaded Manfred to listen to it: in secret, of course, for poor Célie, confronted by Manfred. . . ! So he brought him to the landing, not far from the room which Célie was 'doing', with the song on her lips as she worked. Her voice that day, in Gaston's opinion, reached the heights of pathos.

'Well, Manfred?'

The elder brother listened on, waiting till the last tremulous note had died away—that last cry from the tomb. And Gaston looked sideways at him, deeply moved and triumphant.

'It's all right for a laundry-maid,' Manfred conceded at last, 'but if you really want to hear something, get Ferline to sing "*Roi Renaud de guerre revint*".' Manfred paused, as if he indeed saw the extraordinary spectacle, and as he went on, he might have been talking to himself: 'Wait till she gets to that bit—"Your wife's brought to bed of a king!"—ah, Ferline sings it out to the ends of the earth!' He laughed quietly, and came back to the present. 'But your Célie, Gass'—she sings like a creaking pump!'

CHAPTER V

A JEALOUS GOD

IN Gaston, Christian instruction found a receptive soil. So receptive that the raw country curé—who was used to distributing dogma by the spadeful and driving it home with the rod—was puzzled. His name was Lenoir, but he was quite white, with a great silvery mane that fell to his shoulders. And yet the sombre name did not altogether belie him, for it was well suited to his dark, magnificent eyes—eyes formidable enough beneath their coal-black brows. But the vacillation inherent in his character was suggested by his *indecisive mouth*, which sagged open in moments of emotion or anger. He gave the impression that his scruples would wear him out long before his time. The thought of a fragment of the Host, overlooked at mass, would drive him to distraction.

But meanwhile he was obsessed with the thought of the eternal fire; he could hear the devil's hoof-beats *resounding* on the sunniest day, and echoing through all the woods. On his arrival at the château, he would install himself in a plush arm-chair, which in the course of his fulgurations was transformed into some Horeb or Sinai. The doctrine of love he soon disposed of—it offered no support firm enough for his soul, and he plunged with zeal into the punishments threatening mankind even unto the seventh generation.

These waters were too deep for the gentle Gaston. He couldn't follow his teacher at all. He would blink and drop his eyes, studying some knot of wood in the floor, to raise them furtively and lower them once more. Sometimes his mother wished Manfred to be present, too, and then the

lesson would lose its forcefulness. It could not make Manfred quail. Totally impassive, he would sit there twisting a silver pencil between his fingers, and nothing—not even the mention of those nameless terrors that had befallen the blasphemers—could make him stop.

The curé, losing some of his assurance, and fearing to use too obvious examples, would fall back on the great truths, the fundamental mysteries. In Gaston he always knew that he had an ally. He had only to say 'Christ died for us' to recapture the boy's ardent attention and arouse in him an almost painful emotion, which communicated itself to the worthy priest and strengthened him in his own belief.

What need had he to emphasize such a truth? That bodily death, that suffering—the child had seen them. Was not the oratory evidence enough? And it was as easy for the curé to stir him to response as it would have been for St. John to move to compassion one of the holy women who watched with him at the foot of the Cross.

Gaston was full to overflowing with gratitude and love; and in the silence of these two, the priest and the child, who both looked in their souls upon the same visions, Manfred's manner appeared cold and indifferent. On one occasion, after a moment's painful reflection, he began diffidently:

'If God is all-powerful, Monsieur le Curé, why did He impose such martyrdom upon His Son?'

The curé had no need to reply. Tongue-tied no longer, Gaston turned to his brother.

'Why, Manfred, for love! For love of us, for His great love——' and he swept his little hand towards the wall, indicating his mother's chapel, where that carved and painted body still lay crucified.

Thus, from the hand of Hernando Mayor, light-hearted Andalusian, inspiration still flowed.

The state of religion in Normandy at this time can only be explained if we admit a survival of Jansenism—

one of its last moments of activity. It must also be observed that the orthodox priests 'conformed' rather than 'believed'. Many of them, no doubt, had a vocation and had heard the call in their hearts, but there were far more to whom their priesthood represented little more than an honourable status which raised them in the social sphere. A desire to become an official does not make for a worthy priest. Like dutiful members of society, these officials of dogma were exemplary in the performance of their duties—all the more so, perhaps, because their hearts were not affected.

But apart from this, the austere Jansenist sect held out some iron idealism to delight the hardy soul. Nothing was made easy for its followers. They lived for the absolute alone, despising mundane things; facile solutions they rejected. For them the unattainable, or damnation—the melancholy fatalism of grace. This renewal of Jansenism was the Church's belated romantic movement.

They were no prosy teachers, these Jansenists, but poets, advocates of superhuman ideals. Their sermons pointed to heights which must have seemed, even to the most willing, impossible to scale—and they lost them a good many listeners, who saw only futility in going to hear them.

The proof that many good people were discouraged by the priests lies in the fact that many of our churches—and there were far more in 1830—are empty to-day. People did not want to stop to think, or even to pray, if damnation awaited them at every step of their thoughts. Prayer ceased; and without prayer faith slips away. Faith can only be held in clasped hands.

The private chapel of the La Bare château was an unusual one. It fell into three sections: the choir, a sort of gallery in front of the choir, and the nave. The pulpit ran the whole width of the church on the same level as

the altar, and was separated from the choir and the nave by the communion table and rail. One could enter it directly by a side door. The nave was about a foot lower. The guests of the château occupied the gallery, the peasants sat in the nave. Gospel side, the men; Epistle side, the women.

The design was such as to strike the imagination—all the more since all the light of the choir windows fell on the pulpit, the others admitting only a greenish illumination, dimmed by the trees of the park. Of the close-packed, motionless gathering, one could only distinguish the women's coiffes to the left, and to the right, reddish flakes that were the men's faces seen above their sombre clothes. When you looked, all eyes were turned towards you menacingly.

Of the women, Gaston never caught more than a glimpse of their seats as they turned their chairs, for, placed as they were behind him, he only saw them when the moment came for the congregation to turn round and sit down. In the grey, slatey mass of menfolk he could pick out some faces that he knew, which would have comforted him—had not their Sunday clothes and their stiff Sundayish air quite transformed their usual friendly aspect. Devotion is not a thing which people undertake with gaiety!

The three gamekeepers stood a little in front of the men, but they were in 'mufti', without their badges, their cartridge-belts, their mesh game-bags and their gaiters. How could the child recognize his faithful companions in those three fellows whose eyes gazed at the chasuble as if it concealed some inaccessible poacher?

Nor could Gaston see the children who were his play-mates. They were lost in the crowd.

Gaston's thoughts would quickly turn towards the altar once more. Wasn't it up to them, the family, placed so near to the altar as to make them almost priests themselves, to set an example to the rest? And a mortal

fear would seize the boy. Had he not allowed his thoughts to wander—been guilty of an inattention sufficient to make him unworthy of the mass?

As an adolescent he found this scruple an intolerable weekly burden. He would take the priest aside—before the lunch at which he and every one else were present.

‘I thought twice of my horse. Ought I to go into the village and hear another mass?’

‘I forbid you,’ the priest would answer.

And Gaston’s thoughts ran:

‘He’s afraid of upsetting papa. He doesn’t like sending any of the men out on the road on Sundays.’

Then, after a period of hesitation—of self-torture—he would set out on foot, telling the butler that he would not be back in time for the *grand déjeuner* (they no longer called it ‘dinner’).

For five minutes or so the Marquis raged in solitude. Then he might send a carriage out to meet his son. Gaston would return full of humility. La Bare, on those occasions, caught the eye of his ally Manfred and exchanged a bantering, twinkle. Manfred smiled, affectionately enough, with a little hopeless gesture. Madame de La Bare was a little worried about her ‘poor chick’. The phrase was not so inapposite.

Manfred had made an attempt to put an end to these awkward moments. But he did not find the help he needed to attain his goal. Gaston inspired in him some state in which fear and respect mingled with humiliation and enthusiasm—and fight against it though he might, Manfred could not but feel a certain irritation too. In the end, he gave up—after a memorable scene which he could never recall without a feeling of embarrassment.

There was to be a ‘mission’ in the village, with evening sermons—a fête for the whole district. Gaston, it was plain to see, was all eagerness to go, especially as some of the horses were sick and he would have to come

back on foot—a magnificent walk through the night. But he had only just turned ten and his parents would never have allowed him to go alone.

‘Well, Gass’—coming?’ smiled Manfred. ‘Let’s both go.’

‘Oh, Manfred!’

The two children, on their red plush-covered bench, were sitting under the nose of the preacher, and caught the full fury of his vociferations.

‘Eternal damnation,’ he thundered, ‘an eternity full of terrors. . . .’ The phrases beat over them like the waves of the sea.

‘Eternity,’ he cried again. ‘Imagine a globe of steel of the same size as our world. Once in every thousand years this great globe is brushed by the wing of a bird. When the swallow’s wings, touching the steely surface once in a thousand years, have worn it down and cloven it in two—then—’ (and here came one of those well-timed oratorical pauses in which you could see the audience shrinking from the charged silence)—‘then eternity will have but begun——’

The priest held out his left arm and struck the sleeve of his surplice with his other hand as if brushing it.

‘A thousand years! Two thousand! Three thousand—and is my surplice worn?’

The sweat shone out on his forehead. He was carried away by his passionate eloquence, drunk with the heady liquors of his faith, his proselytizing zeal, and his terrible pessimism. Manfred listened coldly. But Gaston had turned pale.

This mission lasted three weeks. It sometimes had singular results (for instance, employers would find themselves once more in possession of little things they had lost).

Gaston and Manfred were on their way home, the younger boy’s progress something of a hop, skip and jump

beside his brother's—who for his sake shortened his own firm and supple stride. In the clear winter's night hung a thousand diamond clusters. The frost stung their faces—that stiffening frost which makes it so difficult for each feature to move—as if the stars had launched a quiverful of sharp arrows.

Gaston could not keep a straight course. At times he would stop altogether and gaze up at that great dome till a giddiness overcame him and his very soul seemed to reel: a low murmur came from his lips.

Manfred stopped. His brother ran on to catch him up. This stir of sensations was very remote from what he felt on a summer's day in the great plains. Here the conceivable, the existent, was left behind. Here he entered into contact with the infinite. Here, above him, lay the proven certitude of infinity in space—so why not an infinity of time—that eternity whose menace still lingered disturbingly in his memory?

The logic was simple enough. The two eternities merged, became one in his imagination. All that—all that above—those stars and skies—had no end. No vault lay above that which one's own eyes could see—no farthest limit, to put an end to space—and therefore no boundary to the endless progress of time. And thus from the limitless distance Gaston conceived the idea of interminable time. If he should slip from the earth and fall, he would fall eternally.

That cold clasp which encircled his chin was the clasp of infinity. Infinity was warning him.

And then, from the cruel depths of his suffering, from the bursting, silent agony within him, was torn a cry: 'O God!'

'Come on, Gaston, don't hang back like that——'

'I'm coming, Manfred; I'm coming.'

In his thoughts was the fire 'which never sinks'. One tiny burn could cause such pain—but one's whole body thrust into the fire—ah! never, never!—and not even the dread hope of death to bring an end at last to the

torments. . . . And it was enough to let one's thoughts wander during mass to incur, to merit all that punishment! He would never go to High Mass again—there were too many things to catch his eye and distract his thoughts. How could one avoid them? And all through life there were so many times when one might sin. . . . 'O God! O God!' As he ran on to catch up his brother, he wept and shook his head wildly.

Manfred caught his arm.

'What's the matter, Gaston? Here, take my hand.'

He plunged their clasped hands into the pocket of his goat-skin coat. That was better! Gaston spoke quickly, nervously:

' . . . it would be better to die, now—at once. It makes me afraid when I think of death, in my bed, every night. But it would be better. . . . I'll ask God to take us before we can commit the great mortal sins. You don't think I've committed a mortal sin—eh? Manfred—or you?'

'Gaston!'

'No. I should have said the eternal sins. . . .'

'No,' came Manfred's firm reply. 'Don't be an idiot, Gass.' If you believe that any acts of ours can bring about such terrible punishment, you're only believing the things they say——' he emphasized the last word. 'So stop! and only believe part of it. It cancels itself out, you know. Don't they tell us, too, that one mere moment of repentance is enough to absolve us? So there, little stupid! It's even simpler than that: they tell us that a little scapulary, worn at death, will preserve a man from hell. You've got one. So have I. Well, then? That's all right. Don't worry any more——'

'Yes, that's true. You're so kind, Manfred, and right, too. But the scapulary—I'm not so sure of it as I am of all that——'

And he raised his arm, in a slow, circular movement, as if to embrace the depths of the universe, that accumulation of distance upon infinite distance, beyond the

sun's light and the stars. And the little fellow panted once more:

'I'm afraid of that—the gulf! The abyss! Afraid of falling, Manfred—falling . . .'

'Pull yourself together, Gaston. Come on, let's run a bit. We're in the open here, and it's cold. Come on!'

CHAPTER VI

THE LITTLE SQUIRE

THE next morning, Manfred posted himself about five hundred yards along the road from the park gates. He wanted to meet his mother as she came back from mass. He had walked through the woods, lest he should encounter his father—the Marquis by now would be sitting at the main gate with his Louis Veuillot. The *Gazette de France* might go for a whole day unopened, but never the *Univers*.

On that wintry day of tenuous silences the road stretched out endlessly, flat and almost luminous, and Manfred, from far off, could distinguish his mother's silhouette from the three upon the road—at that date a lady was easily recognizable from her peasant sisters. He sent up a cry like an owl's, and waved, lest seeing him Madame de La Bare should fear that something grave and untoward had happened.

'I've been wanting to have a word with you about Gaston, mother. I don't know whether this mission's too good for him. It affects him, you know.'

'But why shouldn't it, Manfred? Perhaps it doesn't affect you enough!'

Manfred smiled. His mother smiled too.

'H'm,' he began. The ejaculation was one with which he often opened his remarks. 'I'm nearly sixteen, and Gaston's not eleven yet. And then the missionary really only preaches at the peasants, you know—they're his goal, of course, his real goal. Gaston isn't so—so obtuse as they are—and he feels the force of every word. It goes right through him.'

Madame de La Bare possessed a great fund of optimism

—too much. Had the Marquis known the full extent of the disturbance in Gaston's soul he might have been more anxious. But he refused to consider the existence of such matters. Madame de La Bare was more able to understand them, but what she found never affected her very deeply. A sort of unctuousness conjured away her care. In her there existed a great capacity for hope—even when it was a question of material things—and a high faith in God. God would watch over them. . . .

In the very depths of her being, was she even sure of living? Life on earth was a troubled and confused period; a voyage through uncertainties, bringing pain, but impossible to evade; an uncomfortable journey, in which one must accept all vicissitudes and not intensify to the degree of tragedy every little incident that would so quickly be forgotten in the blessed state to come. On earth she found herself, so to speak, at an inn, lacking the comforts, the company and the cleanliness that she would meet with in heaven, her real home. But the discomfort was not for long. . . . 'War is war,' she would say to herself; 'life is life.'

'We must remember, Manfred, that these missions don't come very often, and only last a very short time. What we receive there is a remedy—a violent remedy—to give us health not for a month, but for whole years ahead. The effect must be violent, so that it will be lasting. In a few weeks, Gaston will be his normal self again—his first communion will end all this nervousness . . .' she hesitated, then, on a bolder note, 'like marriage for some girls.'

'Do you really think so, mother? You don't think the "remedy" will undermine his health? Do you? Well, that's all right, then. We won't talk any more about it. But last night—what with the steel globe and the sparrow's wings—eternity, you know—I was quite worried about the poor kid. And the preacher stood there, hopping about like a squirrel—'

'Manfred!'

'I was awfully afraid Gaston would faint, or something—it would have been awful . . . for him, of course . . . and it would have looked so bad! Still, if you think—I suppose you're right.'

They walked on in silence through the first gay sunlight of the day. Manfred had not finished.

'And what worries me too, mother, is that I'm pretty sure that papa hates all that sort of thing . . .' he seemed to be talking to himself. Madame de La Bare's interest rose high as she listened; for once, she was learning what these unfathomable children thought about, ' . . . and in a manner of speaking, he isn't so far wrong. Would he think Gaston really "normal"—as he puts it—if he knew him as well as—as well as I think I know him?'

'Normal? Well, Manfred, that means the same as the one who judges him. Do you think that to me you yourself are "normal"?''

'H'm! Well, I try to be. I try to act, even to think—and that's the hardest part, you know—like any one else of our world. I try to follow our traditions. . . .' He was in deep water now, being irked by this introspection into traits of character and tendencies which were involuntary rather than conscious. 'I mean—after a good many centuries, we're still here, and we've got an honourable place in the world; so isn't it our duty, not to go looking for another way of life?'

'We have endured, Manfred, but have we grown greater? I don't mean from the point of view of our lands, and our wealth, or the importance of our family—but have we ennobled the quality of its members? And perhaps Gaston—won't Gaston, with his troubles and his scruples, rise above the narrow limits in which we've always lived?'

"A worker in the morning, an idler at night"—that's what papa would say. A steady pace gets you farthest. What a puzzle it all is! Isn't it our duty to stick to our confines—our narrow limits—ennoble them, if you like, but not try to break away? I imagine that's the rôle we were born to play—something like that—we ought not

even to contemplate breaking away from it. Peasants—peasants, a little better in quality, perhaps; that's what we are. The link between the peasant and—the top drawer,' he smiled, 'the people that should govern and invent things—like the Broglies, the Clermonts——'

'It's a humble rôle, and a fine one,' replied Madame de La Barre: 'but that mustn't prevent us from trying to reach a higher level of development in our spiritual life.'

Manfred was silent with thought. Then:

'Yes! It should, really. For then we should be—*déclassés*, mother.'

'Oh!'

'I've always thought that I should be fond of La Barre, that I ought to do everything I can for it. One must be practical, that's the main thing. Have plenty of money to keep up our rank——'

'What does our rank mean to-day, Manfred—my wise Manfred?'

'Mainly, to be generous. Oh yes, I've thought it all out—and powerful, so that we can help; and decisive, so that we can act well, and act quickly. We must be indifferent, to a certain extent, too, otherwise we might let rancour slip in. And courageous—to die, and to make others think that it is easy to die. . . .'

His mother's respect for his words was obvious as she looked at him. With an effort, he continued:

'But I sometimes wonder if the game is worth the candle. Isn't every one against us, to-day? We're attacked on all sides. So is it all worth it? For instance—I myself, I shan't be able to marry any one I like. Gaston is the younger son. He can even turn artist if he has a mind to, and he can marry his laundress, if that's his heart's desire. Still, I think . . . however . . .'

'What is it that you think?'

'Nothing.' He spoke in a strangely decisive, authoritative tone. 'Well, Gaston will be able to live just as he likes, and in some fine part of the world, maybe. But I—it's for me to stay here, in my little kingdom—and never

to leave the sad Ouche country. And to contract an alliance'—the word came out with a thin smile—'with some woman of good family, and all the rest of it! Let's hope——'

Madame de La Bare made him face the ultimate issue.

'And if all that is wasted labour? If this ungrateful century takes La Bare from you, after all your efforts?'

He looked at her.

'Do you really think that will happen? Yes, perhaps. . . . Those who win always deserve to. . . .'

Madame de La Bare, trying to evade any display of emotion—which was rigidly forbidden—contented herself with remarking, with a touch of pity and a hint of raillery (just the right tone):

'Poor Manfred de La Bare, with all his family on his back!'

'Yes,' replied her son, gravely enough.

They walked on. The trees of La Bare came into view, together with the white fences of the avenue, and the lodge. Manfred began again, with some haste:

'Does papa ever speak to you about Gaston, mother, in that way? Is he worried like me?'

'I think Gaston gives him a few surprises. But his love of horses reassures him. He thinks that when Gaston's able to take a lot of exercise, all his—all his nerviness will go by the board.' She laughed a little. 'I say, "His first communion," and your father says, "A good horse between his knees"—and we're both right.'

Thanks doubtless to her purity of heart, the charming Marquise still had a child's gaiety—a bubbling, exuberant gaiety. Manfred smiled, but shook his finger at her.

'Mummy! I think it's true enough to say that papa's very different from you—he has no life within himself, like you, but—don't be angry, *ma petite maman*'—he smiled again, he regaled her with his endearing smile, a little slow, a little malicious, and so completely charming—

CHAPTER VII

STUDIOSUS EQUORUM

GASTON took to a horse as a duck takes to water. Manfred showed no jealousy—jealousy being the most heinous of crimes, to be avoided like the plague; but all his efforts, all the knowledge he had gained, could not give him the easy assurance of that born horseman, his brother.

The first experience was a sensational one. The child had escaped from his nurse's vigilance—deliberately, in fact—for he was in the kitchen, looting the remains of the water-melons served at table; they formed a peerless delicacy for the equine palate. Loaded with these red and green crescents, he went out to the paddock, where an old and well-loved mare dreamed away her time. Nanoune was one of the family. 'We'll have to send out invitations for her funeral when the time comes,' Amélien would smile. The child, in his grey and blue petticoats, unlocked the double-barred paddock-gate and called to the venerable mare. And while Nanoune, wild with a gourmand's delight, was thinking of nothing but this new delicacy, Gaston hopped up on to her back via the fence, and only a moment later, crying, 'Come on, Nanoune!' he was drumming his little heels into the vast expanse of that rotundity. Off they went—at a trot, and no reins either! Nanoune made, happily, in the direction of her stable.

In the little drawing-room the Marquis was sipping his coffee and calvados—as a prelude to the siesta which he would never acknowledge taking. The fact that he had 'just closed his eyes for a moment or two' was all that he would ever admit. But how could he resist it when he was up every morning at five!

him company, and to whose teasing the noble animal good-naturedly submits. The one certain method of dealing with a refractory horse is to put him in the care of the tiniest stable lad.

That ride on Nanoune's back was a red-letter day, and it bore fruit. They put Gaston in the saddle straight away—with a mount on which he was better able to get a good grip. And at seven years old the child well deserved all the 'Well done, old chap's of the grooms, who would stand with their hands on their hips, nodding their heads in admiration—and that grave, proud, almost tender look from the master of the house, his father. -

Was it his very weakness—the excessive pliability of that spine, which was soon to develop a definite curve—that enabled him to settle so naturally into the saddle, the cartilages of his vertebræ accommodating themselves to seat the little fellow exactly in the very place where his whole body could be at one with the movements of his mount? There was no need to make him understand the exact position required by any of that peculiarly piquant stable diction which had been employed so long that its coarseness was scarcely noticed. The child was already part of the horse.

'He sticks on like a baked apple!' declared the Marquis. 'He makes Manfred look a bit raw. Manfred's seat's a bit jerky—but'—and his voice would lower with pride—'in five years or so, with a grip like that, he'll squeeze the life out of a Percheron!'

Our generation, when it passes, will have been the last to appreciate the full meaning of a phrase like 'a fine stable'. To-day, even in the studs—even at Saumur—along with a real love of the horse, a love for its speed, its sure foot, its strength, there goes a faint but undeniable flavour of disdain. Machines and motor-cars have made these indispensable qualities seem a little laughable. What was once a matter of necessity has become one of capricious taste. Horses are a luxury,

as superfluous as a mere collection of walking-sticks or snuff-boxes, but more expensive. Yesterday, with an hour ahead of you and a peerless horse, the world was yours.

'Go to the stables'—Madame Lieurre was right. You could very rarely visit the stables without finding the Marquis or Manfred there. Imagine a present-day household in which every one has his own car and his own theories, and tries them out on his own pet engine and everybody else's too—and you'll have some rough analogy for the stables at La Bare.

Since this was a medium-sized establishment, they only kept six horses and a pony. Among them were two German horses for the carriage—fat, sleek blackamoors which were Madame's only vanity. The Marquis indulged her whim, though among the fine Norman stock, and so close to the heart of Perche, the Mecklenbergers struck a note of slight absurdity. But the Marquis had his own sly revenge on all his wife's fads. The other two carriage horses were great broad-backed Percherons from the Tainchebraye stables—trained by Roger de Tainchebraye, a close cousin of the La Bares. He was now an old man, often spoken of though never seen, but his views on horses were incontrovertible. It must be admitted that where the lords of these châteaux were concerned, if you were sound on horses you didn't need to cultivate any other branch of knowledge. That was enough to single you out for your wisdom.

The highest praise you could award to any man lay in the remark: 'There's not much about horses that he doesn't know.' Many strange flavours mingled in this passion—old memories, of an epoch when the horse remained the appanage of the nobleman, typifying the very lyricism of action. Perhaps these men imagined that they were thus fulfilling one of the duties of their caste—a duty that certainly didn't weigh heavy on them. It was something of a cult, undoubtedly—with a touch of

the secret society about it, in its generous friendships, its mutual aid, and its special language. The horse became the criterion of the man.

A man, indeed, would be compared to a horse. 'He's got a good gait,' you might say of your friend. 'He's a mettlesome fellow'—and every physical peculiarity had its own equine equivalent, crooked legs, bandy legs, or short front.

Just as to-day one judges a man's social rank by his accent and the words he uses, so you were accepted then if you referred to your horse as 'my calf', or 'my nag', or even 'my herring'. But if ever you happened to call it 'my beast', you were disqualified for life.

Gaston, hereditary heir to an infinitely complicated science, was surrounded with an admiration from the whole household. He remained unaware of it—he was too infatuated to think of anything but that strange well-being he knew the moment he was in the saddle. At eleven, the child rode bareback, without so much as a blanket—so as to be close to his pony, to be able to cling on with his thighs and knees to that warm hide which glistened with sweat. No more need of fences or paddock-gates when he mounted. Up from the ground he would spring, a meagre little puppet, legs akimbo, to fall neatly into the saddle.

And following him with their eyes, watching him, as he was immediately caught up into that close harmony of movement, the stable-folk would express their admiration.

'He's a real horseman if ever there was one!'

And all this time that 'other remedy' remained an uneasy memory in the house. It had evoked admiration, too, at the time, but a vague anxiety now predominated, even in Madame's thoughts.

At Gaston's first communion the piety of the child had been abnormal—abnormal, the word that the La Bares disliked so much. They felt, indeed, that on such an occasion no piety could justly be called exaggerated,

but this child's fervour made their own seem a weak thing. On the evening before, he had gone the round of all the servants, asking their forgiveness for any brief impatience or anger which he might have shown. Some of the old gnarled women wept. 'Ah! we should bless you rather, Master Gaston!' Madame Lieurte (between whom and Gaston the peace had never been disturbed for more than two days at a time), cried strangely, 'No—no—pray for me . . .' and she covered her head with the sheet she was darning; and Gaston left her, a great white ghost, groaning at her window-seat.

He received the Host like another Tarcisus, and could not pronounce a word during the whole morning; but he smiled, as if in some mysterious agony. At lunch afterwards in the château he seemed to be dreaming still, and at three o'clock the Marquis was so worried about the boy's state that he mentioned it to his wife.

'Simone! Aren't you—don't you feel a little anxious about him? I don't know what to think. The child has a strange—drunken sort of air.'

She hesitated.

'He's in the grip of feelings—of sensations—which we're too blunted to experience.' She dropped her voice and watched her husband's eyes. 'He's in communion with Our Lord.'

La Bare paced up and down the room for a while.

'It's like something out of a book,' he said timidly. 'D'you think it'll last? It's too moving—too—*impressionnant*.' The term was a new one. He had resorted to it because nothing in his familiar vocabulary seemed to fit the case. 'Yes, it's too affecting. But I suppose it's bound to pass off in time?'

He looked unhappy enough, La Bare, and embarrassed too, as if some one had put him in a false position. And his wife suddenly felt for him one of those spasms of tender pity in which the giant touched her heart as if he had been a small child.

‘But, Amélien, you mustn’t worry. To-morrow, the holidays begin, and he’ll forget all about it.’

But the Marquis’s old cheerfulness was not to be so easily restored. He still looked as if he had just had news of a grave illness in his family. She went up to him and gave his shoulder a little pinch.

‘You must have more confidence in the La Bare temperament, Amélien.’

CHAPTER VIII

PREMONITION

EVERY 14th of August, the La Bares made a journey which lasted all day and which meant a return late at night. Gaston had so far never been taken. When he questioned his brother about it, he was answered shortly enough.

'It's not for you yet, and you mustn't try and find out. Your turn will come.'

Gaston's heart was too full of the secrets which nature heaped up around him, inviting him to solve and understand. He had no need to seek for others—least of all, the secrets of human actions. Besides, in this pleasant household, whose unwritten laws made gay chatter almost a social duty, there existed nevertheless many a mystery—not hinted at by the merest whisper, shrouded in absolute silence. But this could be forgotten in the witty talk with which the most everyday topics were enlivened.

But this year, on the 13th of August, Gaston's father took him aside.

'My boy, to-morrow you're coming with us on the pilgrimage'—and he spoke with a severity which troubled the little fellow, and clouded his mind with a certain fear.

The word *'pilgrimage'* inflamed his imagination so quickly that his mind was immediately filled with pictures of long journeys, of devotions, of ecstasies—an excitement half-way between an earthly and a spiritual plane. Too happy in the anticipation which the word aroused in him, he asked no more. He was full of such thoughts as he hid himself in his tree—a hollow oak where he took refuge sometimes, for inside it he had the sensation of being more alone than anywhere else, his whole personality

bound by those narrow, porous walls that clung so tightly to him. From here he could look out over the whole house. At the foot of this oak there was a grey, lichen-covered sandstone cross. The tale went that here, long before the Revolution, a woman had been executed.

Once more, he observed the general air of bustle, usual at this date, but how significant now that he himself was to take part!

From here he could see the stable-yard. The grooms were getting ready the harness used for long journeys—the big ‘post’ harness with the breast-bands which, they said, tired the horses less—they could pull better without the halters. The footman was brushing his own mourning uniform, and the coachman’s.

Where could their destination be? It was not too soon to begin to wonder, to make inquiries. His first thought had been that they were going to St. James of Compostella. The stars led there. One had but to follow the broad misty pathway of the sky, the shining Milky Way, and it would be easy—especially as they drew south, for there the skies were always clear. One must take a long staff, with a gardener’s gourd tied to the top, and St. James’s shells. Gaston protested when his mother, already a little anglicized, used the English term ‘cockles’. Was it right to suppress their full name, the proud name of the man who had so inspired all hearts—and he had Manfred’s authority for this—that the broad roads to Compostella had been born from the tracks trodden by the pilgrims’ feet?

Yet how could they be back the same night? It would be a rare treat for Gaston, who always had to go to bed on the very stroke of nine, to come back by lamplight. But there was another thing—a pilgrimage by coach—wasn’t that doing it a little too comfortably? But doubtless it was because of papa—papa never went out on foot, unless it was to shoot. But really, to go on a pilgrimage, you ought to be footsore and dusty. And you must beg, too. You must carefully hide the fact that you were a La Bare,

with a magnificent château and so many riches. And the good people who gave you alms would earn the blessing of Heaven.

'Oh, look! The gardeners among the lilies!'

Waist-deep among the flowers, the men were cutting the tall stems—methodically, in order not to despoil the beds.

At dinner, Gaston could scarcely eat a thing. He was up at five, after a sleepless night, and putting on the new black suit which was laid out on his chair—a suit in which he looked amazingly grown up. When his mother saw him she was quite startled, and she kissed him sadly. At six o'clock, as La Bare cried, 'Are you ready, up there?' they ran down the stairs. All the household was astir. The big brake waited at the foot of the steps, armed with the three great horses that signified a long expedition. A Percheron in the middle, between the shafts, and on either side one of the Mecklenbergers. Inside, piled against the seat, were great sheaves of lilies wrapped in damp muslin, with a can of water to keep them fresh on the journey. It would be a fine day. A grey mist lay everywhere, but it was sure to rise, thought Gaston, strangely excited. Madame de La Bare was rather poorly: she was not coming. But against all her husband's angry remonstrations she insisted on seeing them off from the steps. A second time she kissed Gaston, with that strange hint of strong emotion.

Then, in a thunderclap, with dreadful certainty, Gaston knew. They were going to sacrifice him! Like Isaac! That explained the dread foreboding that had filled him with anguish. Yes—now that he had been purified by the body of Our Lord, they were going to sacrifice him. On the mountain! And yet, every other year, Manfred had come safely back. But Manfred was the eldest son—'And me,' thought Gaston, 'just his younger brother. . . . Mummy!' he cried. It was more than a cry: it was an

agonized appeal. His mother kissed him once more, and he heard her murmur:

'Be careful, Amélien—be gentle, won't you?'

Yes, like Isaac——

'I'll see you again to-night, Gaston! Don't overexcite yourself.'

'Mummy! Good-bye, mummy!'

'Don't worry, dear. I'll be waiting for you.'

As if walking in his sleep, he got up into the brake. From the story of Abraham's sacrifice, the child had drawn perhaps the cruellest and sharpest joy of his whole imaginative life. As he pictured to himself every slow detail, he was frightened to the marrow of his bones. He, who could never learn anything by heart, could recite the entire chapter, with an emotion in which, paradoxically enough, anxiety and fear were swept away by the pure ecstasy. Nameless, inexplicable pleasure, but so strong, so ineffable, that he almost swooned. He saw every step in that progress towards the rude altar. 'Take the wood for the burnt-offering, my child'—and he saw himself bending sadly and meekly beneath the bundle of rough faggots. 'My father!'—that pleading cry—'Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?'—he would catch his breath in agony. 'All in good time, my child.' 'You are the victim'; and from Gaston's soul came the cry, 'I—I am the victim!' For he had delivered himself up, body and soul, to the drama to come, in which he, not Isaac, was to play the part. He took the bundle of faggots on his shoulders and climbed higher and higher. Before him was the whole terrifying landscape of the Bible. The mountains of Gilboa: O mountains of Gilboa, O mountains which shall see neither dew nor rain. . . . He saw the ravaged, tawny heights. And Gaston underwent, as it were, a morbid trance—he saw the gentle white limbs of Isaac bound, and his slender back bent. Beneath those encircling cords the clear white limbs took on a roundness yet more noble, fairer, more touching, more—he did not know.

Dreams such as this, the terrifyingly detailed dreams of half-sleepless nights, he had known; but this one, to-day, swept him feverishly onward with cyclonic force, towards its consummation. The swirling eddies of his imagination carried him out of reach of reality. The reassuring thought, 'Mummy never tells a lie—she said she'd wait,' was forgotten, lost in that flood of vivid images which was drowning him.

But so many hours of devotion, so many stories of saintly, martyred heroes, had heightened his own spiritual fervour that a reaction, in force almost as great as his terror, intervened to steady his thoughts—and he saw with terrible clarity the meaning of his life until now, and of that which lay before him. He in his turn was the lamb—the lamb of propitiation. He was on his way to make some mysterious redemption, to ensure the happiness of those around him—of mummy, Manfred, papa—whom he loved so well. A few seconds sufficed for him to see the whole tragedy, and its ultimate necessity. He consented. He straightened up on the cushions to catch a last glimpse of his mother.

'Don't be afraid,' he said, with a smile that was almost sublime. 'I'll be brave . . .' and he sank down on his seat, swallowing the sobs that were rending him.

'What's this?' frowned the Marquis. 'You're being stupid, Gaston.'

That hurricane in his soul had taken so few seconds that its force had spent itself before the party had properly installed themselves.

'Cheer up!' laughed Manfred, pretending that his father's anger was only feigned. 'Turn off the tears, Gass—you are a silly.'

The little fellow sat straight up once more. His hand groped for Manfred's, clasped it nervously. The brake moved off. The trees of the avenue went by one by one—bigger than life-size, shrouded as they stood with mist. The carriage, which would travel along the open road

with a dull rumble, emitted a squeaking sound as it went over the gravel drive. Through his tears, Gaston saw the house as a faint, rose-coloured blur.

'What is it?' Manfred asked him—leaning over towards his brother from his own seat opposite, with an intuitive understanding. 'Are you frightened, Gaston? We're only going to grandpapa's tomb—May as well tell him now, father, he'll know in a couple of hours, anyway!' (La Bare grunted.) 'That's all—there's nothing to be afraid of. We take the flowers for the anniversary. . . .'

What was this? Gaston's spirit was slow to comprehend, but physically he knew at once that he was reprieved. He nodded his head in confused thankfulness. He was shaking now (Gaston's tears were always followed by even more alarming nervous spasms)—shaking so violently that he could not say a word. He looked at the bunches of lilies which lay in front of him—and another storm of emotion, almost equal to those minutes that had now gone by, broke over him. And then something within him loosened itself—slipped suddenly away, and the dreadful gaping void that it left in its wake was agony, too . . . and he realized that now that he was set free from his sacrifice he was disappointed.

The sun's rays pierced the mist, drove it back till it hung, soft and white, in the distance. . . . The trees spread their branches as if renewed in their strength, their fresh fragrance, and they gave off a scent so delicious that one could almost taste it. The child was calm again—but with a sorrowful, melancholy calm.

The brake had to stop for an unusually large flock of sheep which were moving to their winter pastures. Manfred gave Gaston a little punch on the knee.

'Get up on the box, old chap.'

'Shall I?' asked his younger brother, a little ashamed at being so easily roused from his melancholy.

'I'll hoist you up,' said Manfred.

The coachmen laughed and made room for him as, feet

the foot of a wooded hill. Manfred and the Marquis each took a sheaf of lilies, and Gaston saw that there remained a third, a smaller one. No doubt it was meant for him. He picked it up.

Manfred was carrying a watering-can. The horses went on to a farm whose roof lay shining in the sun. The three travellers, in single file, entered the thicket by a path hardly perceptible through a tangle of heather. They climbed higher. Around them the air was pulsing with the singing murmur of the woods. Their steps, upon the springy ground, made no noise, but the Marquis paused now and again to tap the clumps of heather with his stick.

'Weather for snakes,' he muttered. Gaston felt a cold sweat on his brow.

At last they came to the crest of the hill—a sort of cornice beneath grimly twisted red Riga pines. And there stood a cross of black stone, outlined against a spreading landscape where the forests and the valleys shimmered blue in the heat. On the cross fell fleeting shadows, so that it seemed dappled like lizard skin.

'Take off your cap, Gaston,' commanded Monsieur de La Bare.

He and Manfred had removed their own hats and stood still, facing the stone. The Marquis crossed himself, ostentatiously—there was a touch of arrogance in the sweeping gesture. At the foot of the cross there was a kind of trough, cemented and lined with pebbles.

'De profundis clamavit anima mea.'

The Marquis recited the line, and Manfred replied:

'A custodia matutina usque ad noctem.'

Gaston, too, was anxious to play his part, but he never could remember Latin. He could only join in the 'Amen'.

Monsieur de La Bare, after a few seconds of silent reflection, began to unwrap his flowers. After the trough had been filled with water from the can, they put down the sheaves, the two largest on each side and the small one in

the centre, leaning against the foot of the cross. Stepping back three paces, the Marquis took Gaston's hand, and began in a firm voice:

'It was on this spot that your grandfather—my own father—was shot down by the Blues, just fifty-eight years ago. But it was evening. He hadn't emigrated, he fought for his King, naturally. He was a Chouan. A Chouan, you understand, my boy? And never let any one make light of that name in your presence. Our enemies sullied it by giving it their own meaning. If any one insults that name, fight them.

'But my father didn't die in battle. He was coming back after seeing a priest safely into Perche—a faithful abbé, an abbé who had refused to betray our faith or to serve the Republicans. He took him to a little hiding-place, a hut in the forest, and the priest had entrusted to him a box containing the Host, which my father was to put into the hands of a certain trustworthy person on his way back. Now this was on the eve of the Assumption, and there were many people anxious to communicate. When there was no priest, the Host was given to a child—a little child like you, for example—and he, being the purest, would administer the communion to young and old.

'But, on his way back, my father was pursued by a patrol of dragoons of the Sauret Brigade. He had scarcely left the priest's hiding-place—a mere hole in the ground, a well covered up with grass—I'll show you the sort of thing. There are two of them left on the Mauduit estates.

'My father had to get them away from there. So he dived into the depths of the forest, and reached this point, after nearly an hour's hard riding. His horse had already done seven leagues that day—but for that, a horse from this part of the world would have run those blackguards' nags off the map, you may be sure! A rider's no better than his horse! Of course, if my father had thrown down the box he was carrying, they would have found nothing incriminating on him. But he ~~or~~ thus profane the

Body of God—he couldn't leave the wafers for wild beasts to trample on—and so, he pressed on his horse to death, to gain a quarter of an hour in which to hide the pyx in safety. When he got here, he took his knife and scooped out a hole and hid the box at the foot of a beech-tree that used to grow here; there—just there! It was cut down six years ago. He was in the saddle again before they came up. He let them take him. He told them he had tried to escape because he was afraid—afraid! Yes, my father said that! Because he wasn't thinking of himself, but of my mother, and your uncle who is dead now, and of me, who was soon to be born. He admitted that he was a *ci-devant*, a noble, and that he wasn't anxious to face them—the usual things. They were furious to have had all that chase for nothing, but after searching him they were just taking themselves off, when a dog—a dog!—started scratching away at the tree, and brought the box to light. And then my father defied them, spat out his hatred, and of his own accord went and stood at the foot of the tree. Before killing him they stripped him and took his fine clothes, and bound him with his own stirrup leathers. They shot him on the spot. But that wasn't all, they added a blasphemy to their crime: they wanted to profane, in his presence, the Host for which he was dying. They trampled it underfoot, and spat on it, and, confronted with that figure, naked like Saint Sebastian, they had an idea worthy of savages. Wafers, if you moisten them, are sticky: and so they spat on them, and stuck the pieces on to his body, and shot at them like targets, beginning with the least vital spots.

'Stand up, Gaston!

'They left the corpse tied to the tree, and the wolves devoured it. My mother knew nothing till a month afterwards. One of the dragoons, a little better than the rest, happened to pass the spot again, and saw the remains. It was he who told her. My uncle came along, and my cousins too. And they found nothing left but a spur—to-day it is in my room beneath the cross of Jerusalem.

But all the men of our family pursued the assassins, and within six months they had brought them down, every one. I was born avenged!

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'Children who forget the death of their father, Gaston, are not worthy to lift their heads. It is by their constancy, their fidelity and their unwavering vengeance that the justice of God is accomplished: they are the guardians of His justice. Stand up, my boy! One part of your life is finished. Your childhood is at an end. It's now no longer time to love, or to dream. I'm only a modest country gentleman, I know, with no great gifts. But I'm loyal, Gaston. I wait for the legitimate King: as my father waited for him.

'It's easy enough for me. I was born with martyrs round me. But for you it won't be so simple. You're a man now, you've done with petticoats and women's apron-strings. You must be worthy of us. You must swear that whatever may happen, you will recognize no other chief, and with your heart and soul submit to no other than the legitimate King. Manfred swore five years ago, here, on the remnants of the beech-tree. Now it's your turn. Raise your right hand, and say, "I swear, here!"

The child raised his little trembling hand.

'I swear, here.'

When, finally, the three of them turned away, the black cross was flinging over all Perche its double symbol of death, and of fidelity.

La Bare walked ahead, with his great hunter's stride, still visibly affected, while the children, delivered from the strain of the last hour, almost ran in his wake. Already they could see the farm where a meal awaited them—and the yellow seat of the big brake overtopping the hedge, when suddenly the Marquis turned round to Manfred in a rage which convulsed his trembling lips.

'And I haven't told you everything, Manfred,' he cried. 'It was ghastly! God had tricked him!'

The children hung on their step, blanching at the fury which possessed their father. La Bare's shoulders were heaving, and now and again he turned his head as if to conceal the tears of rage which sprang to his eyes.

'Why? What do you——?' began Manfred.

'Yes,' went on La Bare, gulping. 'Once more God was on the other side! . . . What had we done to Him? What could we have done? Those wafers that my father died for—they weren't consecrated! Yes, he could have thrown the box down anywhere. The priest told my uncle so, and wept. He had forgotten to tell my father. . . . Just unconsecrated wafers! . . . Come on, *mes petits*, we must be getting back.'

PART II

'The King's son, in his chariot, comes.'

CHAPTER IX

GRANDS SEIGNEURS

THE times were changing. Amélien de La Bare, his eyes a little duller now, saw his land change with them—his native land: Ouche, Auge, Lieuvain. Napoleon's policy of peaceful penetration was succeeding. Even more than Vendée itself, these regions had been firmly and completely royalist; they had suffered less martyrdom and decimation, but the royalist faith which lingered there was widespread and instinctive, if less fervent. And now the full-throated cry, 'Long live the Emperor!' was to be heard.

Amélien, while he refused to perform any purely intellectual feats, could display a mighty shrewd perspicacity when it came to rural politics or movements, or indeed any quasi-warlike subject whatever. And he was giving his own pessimistic view of these changes with his brandy glass clasped in his hand like a pike.

He was striding up and down the immense library at Broglie; after an intimate dinner the men had come for a smoke among the books, leaving the women in the drawing-room. A vast number of volumes crowded two rooms fifty feet long, dominated by the portrait of Madame de Staël.

'My mother-in-law,' the old Duke would say, with the shadow of a smile, 'was never afraid of tobacco.'

Amélien walked up and down before the tall windows, a broad-shouldered figure, outlined against each

in turn. 'You should put a hundredweight on each shoulder,' thought the Duke, 'and he wouldn't budge.' He followed his guest's progress with a friendly and wholly genuine interest—'There, he's off again!'

The truth was that La Bare, who, when he wasn't sleeping or hunting, was always talking, having so far succeeded in checking his stormy tongue, could resist no longer. Since he could fight in no other way, he fought wordy battles, and the aggressive cock of his head and the ferocity of his expression were war-like enough weapons with which to push home his points. At the village fairs, to which, like all the country gentlemen, he would go dressed in a peasant smock—though keeping his grey or beige jerkin, his check knee-breeches and spotted blue tie—at the fairs he would gather quite a crowd around him.

He was always outstandingly dressed, with an elegance by no means over-modest—for the dust of the roads made you choose colours which contrasted boldly enough—and with his short 'Newmarkets', he looked rather horsey. But opulently so. Since he rode so much, he used a good deal of perfume—the La Bare perfume, a mixture of benzoin and English lavender, which advertised his presence as soon as he crossed the threshold.

To-day he was wearing a black riding-coat and snuff-brown trousers and a huge grey satin cravat. This simple outfit owed its elegance to its unimpeachable cut. It was well fitting yet generous. The dandyism of 1830 had gone by the board.

'Yes, to be sure,' he was saying, 'it's that great rascal Louis Philippe who restored France's prosperity. And when I think of the gang of empty-headed puppets who govern us now, I don't deny there was a lot of good in him. But the peasant only understands things when they're past. They'll all be Bonapartists soon. The old stockings are full to bursting. The countryman doesn't like counting his money. Count it and you'll lose it, he says. But now, under Badinguet, he's finding himself so rich

that his eyes pop out of his head. So it's "Long Live 'Poleon!" the Dutch Bastard, the "Red Hortensia". Under Charles X it was the opposite. The country was suffering from Napoleon's blood-letting, and Charles had to bear the brunt. It's ridiculous. It was Louis Philippe who began to make the roads, but the Emperor opens them—and gets the credit.'

'And yet,' the Duke replied, 'you, who're so fond of the peasants—you ought to be glad they're getting rich.'

'Gold's no good in little doses. It makes a man soft. Not that I mean by that that the rich are always an example! What a funk there was in our families in 'forty-eight! I'm not referring to you, Monsieur le Duc; I well remember the story of how you rode over the mob at Bernay when they wanted to arrest you.'

'M'm—yes,' admitted Broglie, 'I was exasperated by their stupid fury.' He turned to his son—who was soon to be the Minister of the 16th of May—'I'm afraid it was hardly in the parliamentary tradition. But you yourself, La Bare—get your share of public criticism!'

'They make a mountain out of a molehill. I got my men together and had a few words with them, and, believe me, it took years off me to see their faces light up! Old Clérambault, our carpenter—yours, too, my dear duke—cut some loopholes in the shutters for me. Guns inside, we waited for the mob to arrive. With twenty strokes of a hammer, Manfred, you could put the house in a state of defence again. The loopholes are just covered with pieces of wood that could easily be knocked off. . . . But the Barvilles left for Honfleur to take ship, and the . . . (the Marquis mentioned a famous name) were so scared that Madame went running along to the jeweller's with her famous diamond necklace, and the men, loaded like porters and dressed like 'em, took their silver along to the Mint—all their silver that had escaped the Revolution. And there they stood, all five of them, it seems, their hands stretched out for a few paltry florins in exchange. When you go

there to dinner now, you dine off electro-plate (and if it weren't for Monsieur de Ruolz, the inventor, you wouldn't get that!).'

'They're our cousins,' the Duke murmured.

'Well, you've better ones,' La Bare replied tartly. 'Although I must say I tend to despair a little of our great families. Their names are so proud that they cover any sort of marriage provided it's a wealthy one. The ghetto and the Rue des Lombards included! They need power, and so they're hobnobbing with the people who've got it. It's worse to-day than under Louis Philippe: to get an entry to Neuilly, one had at least to ape virtue; for Compiègne, it's licentiousness. Our great châteaux are tainted. They invite people whose fathers, not fifty years ago, came to pillage and rob.'

The Prince de Broglie was listening with high interest to this angry harangue. And from time to time he glanced at the speaker, with those magnificent eyes which saw so much and yet never lingered upon the object they sought. The Prince was very svelte still; he was bending forward a little, lounging over a vast desk which had belonged to Napoleon—Napoleon the First. His father said nothing, but was a little shocked at this. Perhaps he remembered the Emperor, as he had sat at that table.

'Yes,' the old Duke agreed, at last. His bony face still retained something of a hard rusticity. He had a brilliant Algerian rug over his knees, and the rest of his body, in his black clothes, was like a block of jet. 'Yes, I'm sure of it,' he went on. 'Some time ago I, too, could have judged life as you do, simply and uncompromisingly. But the handling of great affairs makes one realize the importance of the meanest details. File the teeth of one tiny cog-wheel, and you can upset the whole mechanism. Blacksmiths—so to speak—have given way to watchmakers.'

'Until the day of battle, Monsieur le Duc, when they'll get their lens knocked out of their eye!'

'But even battles are no longer what they were, Monsieur de La Bare,' smiled the Prince maliciously, 'and the watchmakers will triumph there, too.' He had a shrill voice, which, while a drawback in the Chambre, served him in private circles very well, imparting a considerable emphasis to his words.

'Well, let's hope he'll be a brave man into the bargain,' replied Amélien. He liked both the Broglies, but he feared the son more than the father. And he fell silent.

'Ah! Your defence of La Bare was gallant enough! I can imagine your charming house bristling with guns like a pin-cushion. But you'd have been obliged to yield to more powerful arms than guns, and to greater numbers.' (The Prince was egging him on.)

'Yielded? Never! We might have been beaten, but we'd have reduced the victors' numbers considerably. I don't often miss a snipe. And, come to that, we've all got to die, and it's a fine way to go, in defence of your own hearth, smoking pistol in hand. . . . When things go against us, it's a comforting thought.'

'But a sacrifice like that only means something if it serves some purpose.'

Until this point the Marquis's self-control had been admirable, but now it broke down: his fist clenched over a glass which had just been filled, he seemed to be raising to his lips some funereal libation, some deathly toast.

'Sacrifice always serves some purpose!' he cried. 'And sacrifice of life above all. It's an example. It's a legend planted in the ground—like an avenue of trees—for the future!'

All eyes were upon him, and he felt slightly ridiculous, for he had as much finesse as a bear, and he knew it. He went on, self-deprecatingly and with a smile:

'I'm just a country squire, *Messieurs les Ducs et Pairs*—we country people are like that. I'm told that in Paris the ideal of a youngster is to be a little "exquisite"—a fop who hasn't even the strength to carry a cane.

In my time young men of the world of fashion preferred to be known as "lions".

'Hear, hear!' muttered the old Duke, just as he would have applauded a speaker in the Upper House.

'And I'm rather afraid,' La Bare went on, 'that a certain softness is even getting hold of us. This morning, Manfred, I sent in our resignations to the Chaudesaigues Hunt. Yes, yours as well as mine. Don't start protesting—I'll explain. . . . Here's the story, my friends—while you were away, we found a stag at Gouffern. I was in at the kill—before Chaudesaigues. When he came up, he didn't even seem to have a knife. I offered him mine. He shook his head. "Do you want me to kill?" I asked him—not without some hesitation, for it's hardly usual to have to ask the Master that! He looked down his nose at me, and what d'you think he said! "The huntsmen are coming!" I ask you! Making a huntsman kill a real Saint Hubert—a seven-year-old! And so it was—the valet killed. With a knife tied to a stick—a spear, in fact! At least, that's what I was told, for I certainly didn't stay to see it. All I can say is, "Long live the stag!" on those terms.'

'But there, again, stag-hunting is a very cruel sport—it's retrogressive—and it gives people a bad opinion of us.'

'Well, let people think what they like. It's a fine school for war. You follow an almost non-existent scent—it sharpens your perceptions, it gives you decision and the courage to attack. And if you think it's very comfortable to be confronted with a beast like that—with antlers that long, that can rip open a dog like a bladder. . . . It's no child's play, I can tell you. You think it's cruel? No more than eating lamb and beef. And as long as we go on doing that, permit me to smile.'

'The point is, Amélien, you're always thinking in terms of war. You're always preparing for a campaign—eh? Strange—'

'But no, Monsieur le Duc, it's not so strange,' grumbled

the old campaigner. 'It's all we've ever done. It's fighting that keeps us going, and if they don't want to use me any longer, is that any reason why I should let myself get rusty?'

'And you, Manfred?' asked the Duke. 'Hunting and Chouannerie for you too—ch?'

'Yes, Monsieur le Duc,' he replied. 'Not quite so enthusiastically, perhaps, I've not been under fire yet—but when I've got going, I shan't stop on the way.'

'Well, Amélien, the La Bares won't degenerate!'

'No, never. Rather the reverse.'

'And the quiet one? What does he think?'

But the Duke did not insist, and with a nod of his head and a friendly twinkle in his eye, he left Gaston alone: the child was quite red and agitated.

The Duke and his son watched from the library window as the La Bares' carriage drove off. They found themselves in that irksome mood which follows the departure of one's guests—a mixture of lassitude and a consciousness of the emptiness they have left behind. Only with a certain effort can one take up again the thread of one's own personal interests. They hesitated now. The light ruts left by the carriage wheels glistened in a shower of rain.

'There's no denying that there's something in that fellow. Did you notice the force he gets into his expressions? How on earth does it happen that he passes for a dullard? There must be some envy, some embarrassment at the bottom of it. People want to take the edge off his criticisms. He upsets the easy tenor of their lives. We ourselves, my friend——'

'Well, father—we feel the justice of his criticisms like every one else. But at the same time one can't altogether agree with him. Unfortunately, one can usually feel dubious about the judgment of society when it calls a man intelligent—but never when it dubs him a fool. La Bare is a fool, because he's an anachronism and a

dangerous anachronism. For people like him, gunpowder might never have been invented. He believes in individual strength. At the battle of Cr  cy they thought their strength was going to avail against cannon.'

He paused reflectively. The terrace beneath now lay sombre and soaked in rain.

'People like that are dangerous. They regret the past so much that they put their hands over their eyes to blind themselves to the present. They deceive themselves. They take a banal politeness as a sign of respect and loyalism. In indifference they think they've found fidelity. Have you noticed the way he speaks of "his" men—as if he were Roche-Jacquelein himself.

'They concede nothing—not an inch, and when the day comes, and they're forced to, it'll be too late.'

'But, my dear boy, the glory of Old France was built up by gallant fellows like that. In La Bare you have the archetype of the *ancien r  gime*.'

'Not for long. They've condemned themselves. They bring up their children to take risks as they used to do when they had a dozen boys—and they only have twos and threes.'

'Nevertheless, they're useful. Am  lien has great authority in this part of the world.'

'Naturally,' replied the Prince, with a smile. 'He's an excellent model of a Counsellor-General. Normandy's full of 'em. I, like you, can see their merits, but I'm a little afraid of them. For they're essentially countrymen, they detest Paris—and the town's become the real battlefield to-day. The country's out of date.'

'They live just like their ancestors. You know the story of their family? It's no ordinary one.'

'H'm—I only know they've been here a pretty good time and are connected with some good stock. Our own people have always protected them. They never filled very high places. They're more the men for feats of arms—La Bare's military eloquence is astonishing. Yes, it's difficult not to vote in his favour!'

'It is,' said the Duke, with a certain melancholy—only a few minutes ago the La Bare family had been in this very room. But now, contemplating it in the light of the present conversation, it seemed curiously remote. 'Did you notice the eldest boy?' he went on; 'he's a fine lad.'

'Yes. There's more in him than in his father. That boy's got some ideas of his own. His manner's perfect. As for the youngster—the Dean thinks he's backward.'

'More likely just shy, don't you think? I don't mistrust a shy beginning in a child like that. It may be a sign of greatness to come. Of course, it can lead to affectation, "pose", as they say nowadays. But "pose" need only be a mark of homage to an ideal you have set yourself. Chateaubriand, when he was young, was very much on the shy side.'

'Perhaps it's a characteristic of men of letters, then,' smiled the Prince. 'You must admit, father, that they soon grow out of it!'

'Well said!' laughed the old Duke. 'It gives you the right to leave me alone. So go back to your work with a clear conscience.'

A somewhat analogical conversation was taking place between the La Bares. Amélien regarded the Broglies with veneration, and above them all he cherished *his* Duke. He judged them with a sagacious understanding and with respect. To oppose them would have seemed to him an act of treachery. So that when the liberal politics of the ducal family raised an outcry of indignation among legitimists, Amélien—that 'ship's trumpeter'—relapsed into a silence from which it was impossible to lure him. Once, when cornered, he declared that they were not to be judged by ordinary standards: the Broglie temperament must command and take first place—as if thought, with them, were merely some ebullient outburst, some hereditary tumour. At the same time, he was a little scornful of them for being so intellectual—

and for looking upon action, not as an end in itself but as an experiment to verify their theories. This man Amélien, who passed for a dullard, had penned the dictum: 'The Broglies are the Disraelis of France.'

He did not say 'of Normandy', for all his desire to extol, whenever possible, the brilliance of his province—for in La Bare's eyes, a hundred and twenty years of land-ownership here did not make a true Norman. His own family had been here for a thousand, and it upset him a little to reflect that they had only arrived in the ninth century with Hasting—admittedly before some of the others—but not at a sufficiently early date to enable them to consider themselves as of pure Neustrian origin.

CHAPTER X

THE PAST

'TRUST the La Bare temperament,' Simone had said, and one look backwards sufficed to show that that family temperament was quick enough to surmount any obstacle whatsoever. The duc de Broglie, in his appreciation of the La Bares, had been right to recall their origin. There was plentiful evidence of the violence and the quality of the La Bare blood—for the fact that there were abbeys close to the domain had ensured that their history, though it might lack illustrious names, was faithfully chronicled. It also happened that members of the family had figured in every important event, often playing lowly parts but attracting attention by their audacity and their prowess. Just as the policeman in a photograph of some royal procession, by virtue of standing in the foreground, appears six times as big as the distant monarch, so did the Hordons stand out in history.

Their turbulence had always won them followers, and whenever there was an opportunity to deal a blow or two, they appeared at the head of their men. They had not bothered to bestir themselves for the conquest of England; they were too rich and the goal wasn't far enough away. But when it came to the Crusades! . . . They wouldn't have missed such a jaunt for the world. They flocked eastwards, four at a time. In their coat of arms they vaunted a horseshoe nailed with silver: with their fantastic extravagance, what better could they do than imitate their duke, Robert le Diable, shoeing their steeds in such a way as to edify the peoples!

When Gaston admired their devotion to God's cause, both in the Crusades and in their eagerness to hew down

the Albigenian heretics, the Marquis would try to readjust this over-sympathetic point of view. He had undertaken Gaston's genealogical education himself. 'You're exaggerating, my boy,' he would declare, 'to the point of not understanding at all. Our ancestors were jolly fellows and rough soldiers. For them, these wars were a recreation—a pleasure trip—the spice of their lives. The spring went to their heads and they'd jump at any chance of riding south!'

In truth, the wars in Italy almost brought about the disappearance of the name. The La Bares had in their possession some astonishing letters in which one member of the family had tried to persuade others to join him; he had succeeded in dragging off some brother-in-law, a man with a large family dependent on him, to meet with an entirely unnecessary death from a cannon ball in Piedmont, and then he had gone to immense trouble to ensure that the Duchess of Alençon herself should announce this glorious end:

'I have learned, Mademoiselle, of the great misfortune which hath made you a widow, along with so many others, on Holy Cross Day last (the battle of Marignan) . . . ' a page of good counsel followed, and then the magnificent termination: 'And may the dead rest in God's peace. . . .' Signed 'Marguerite' and dated from Mortagne.

The bereaved wife slept with the letter under her pillow, and kept it so carefully that Amélien, her eleventh descendant, could now be grateful to her husband for having procured him so fair a document—at the price of a few years of his life.

But the history of this swarming family had its seamy side. The eldest sons, indeed, always showed the most respectable royalist sympathies, but the younger sons, astonishing numbers of them, behaved like madmen, seizing upon the slightest excuse for unsheathing their swords. And how they used them, too! Ouche and

One alone, of legitimate birth, but of the others—O Gods of Love—if the legitimate Hordons had once formed a complete guard for the duc d'Alençon the bastards would have sufficed for a whole army corps. Children followed a marriage in shoals—toasts were drunk at the birth and tears shed at the death of one young member after another of this incredibly fertile and incredibly fragile race. In their commonplace books you would find items like this: 'On this day of May, we began cutting the hay in the Long Meadow. Towards three of the clock, my wife was happily delivered of our fifth son.' Then, a fortnight later: 'God has recalled to Himself our second daughter, Ermance.' All with a dispassionate serenity which may have been but submission to God's will. They sowed their wives as they sowed their fields, and waited for the harvest year by year—readily finding a successor if the first wife should die of it. The husbands seem to have been fairly faithful: it was the sons who were responsible for that strange admixture of races and blood, which made every one the half-cousin of every one else, and gave the life of this region its animal quality.

The position of these bastards was one which it is difficult to appreciate to-day. Every house contributed to the support of three or four of these pre-nuptial fruits, and the young wife was very far from taking it amiss. She seemed, indeed, to draw some pride from the fact of being legally married to a source of such fecundity. It was more than possible, too, for a family to take on a sort of additional lustre from its unofficial members, and for the most part the bastards were proud of their blood, the glory of the father's rank concealing the mother's shame. The gamekeepers were thus attached by unrecognized but powerful ties to the estates which they defended. During the period of Chouannerie in Normandy, the Marquis's father went to war with his two natural brothers at his side, and sixty years ago the steward of Renneville—the world knew him by that name though

his own was Aubert—passed, with such notoriety, for the bastard son of a Rohan that he never married, since he could not wed some nobleman's daughter.

From the thought of such furious wenchings, Amélien drew a savage pride. But when he was instructing Gaston in the family history, he was careful not to vaunt these secret victories of his ancestors. That intuitive instinct, which in company enabled him to tell whether a certain tone or a certain type of story would be admissible, warned him to be silent on this section of his subject.

And hence arose a certain disagreeable state of affairs; the Marquis didn't feel perfectly at home with his younger son.

Of course, in the family circle 'women' and spicy stories were not openly mentioned. An outward respect was paid to purity; but, in spite of that, adventures with women evoked discreet admiration. A special emphasis made the Marquis's covert remarks the more piquant—a guarded elation which Gaston was quick to recognize, and which strangely excited him. It was as if his instructions were these: Until you're eighteen, you mustn't smoke or gamble or go after the girls—all that stops you from growing—but afterwards . . .!

CHAPTER XI

THE STRANGE TUTOR

THE Marquis soon found that lessons were growing too much for him. The master who had made an effort to instruct Manfred was a reliable man, but he was growing old and was hardly capable of giving him that final polish. Madame de La Bare ventured to suggest that a few terms in some good Jesuit school would enable Manfred to mix more with his equals and give Gaston the mental and physical discipline that he needed. The elder brother would help the younger. 'It's a good way of moulding a character,' was her opinion.

'Character's never strong enough to stand it,' objected the Marquis. 'College and conscription—I don't like the type of Frenchmen they turn out. No, I'm going to find them a good tutor, and we'll all profit from him.'

The next day he put an advertisement in the *Gazette de France*—he would not touch the *Univers* for this purpose, for it was beginning to have 'a heretical smell'. He received three letters in reply, and decided to go straight off to see the 'birds' in question.

The first 'bird' couldn't tempt him into his cage. 'He smelt oily!' But he was more favourably impressed towards the second as soon as he reached the ill-kept lodge and the hag of a portress, for when he told her that he had come to see 'M'sieur Federspiel' (the Marquis could put a lot into the little word, which became Mon-sieur, M'sieur, or Meu-sieur according to the quality of the person in question), it was with something like devotion that the old woman showed him the way. La Bare, though he did not like to admit it, attached considerable importance to the judgment of servants.

Monsieur Federspiel opened the door himself. He was a red-haired man of pale complexion, and though taken by surprise at this early morning hour was already shaved. He made his apologies for being found *en négligé* in an old coat with so little embarrassment or exaggeration that the Marquis's feelings warmed towards him: he couldn't have done better himself. Federspiel was very thin. 'Can't afford a square meal,' thought the Marquis, 'but we'll soon see to that.' He didn't like people to be thin.

The prospective tutor pleaded guilty to a slight Teutonic accent, but spoke French well enough to create the impression of being a gentleman. The Marquis made him a round compliment upon this. He smiled, a very charming smile which indicated a constant youthfulness, a certain dreamy temperament, a happy submissiveness to destiny. 'This is the man!' thought La Bare.

The German bowed.

'With us,' he said, 'our own language, by the side of yours, was thought nothing better than a patois. Until I was ten years old I was brought up to speak nothing but French.'

'Ah! A good family background,' went La Bare's thoughts. 'But I wonder how old he is?'

At last, in order to be able to take back to his wife some convincing proof of Federspiel's excellence, La Bare asked for references: on political views there was no need to insist—the fact that he had found the advertisement in the *Gazette de France* was enough. But how about his scholastic attainments?

Federspiel had left the University of Jena with two doctorates, and he had recently spent five years as secretary to Monseigneur de Bonald.

'Capital!' murmured Amélien. 'They're fine folk. Old Father Bonald has stoutly upheld our beliefs. So you left there?'

'Monsieur le Marquis,' replied the tutor, with a sudden gravity, 'of all the works of his father, the son who will

soon be Cardinal de Bonald is the only one lacking in royalist sentiment. We shall see striking and profitable conversions.'

'What's that? That Badinguet must be the devil!'

'Oh no!' said Federspiel, with a little gesture of his hand. 'The devil generally presents himself in another guise. These are only those little devils which Our Lord drove into the bodies of the swine.'

'I like you, Monsieur Ferspiel! I like clear thinking and plain speaking. We spend the whole year in the country—near Bernay. D'you know it at all?'

'Quite well, Monsieur le Marquis—I spent some months there with Monseigneur de Bonald, at the duc de Laval-Montmorency's. I like the region, and find it an interesting one.'

'That's fine! So you don't think you'll be bored?'

'Shall I have your permission to go shooting sometimes?'

'You're fond of shooting? Well, you can shoot day and night, M'sieur Ferspiel, and hunt as well, with your pupils. Excellent!'

They settled the question of salary. Suddenly, brusquely, the Marquis looked vexed: Federspiel eyed him with a questioning glance.

'You're a Catholic, eh? Good; but forgive me asking—in case of need we could arrange your holiday at that time—but—do you take the communion at Easter?'

'Except for four years of my life—when I was unable to—I always have done so.'

'Good!' La Bare put some notes on the table. 'No, thanks, I don't need a receipt. Tuesday, then, at the barrier at the Gare Saint-Lazare. The greatest station in Paris is dedicated to the patron saint of the lepers—a happy thought! Let's pray to him before we face the crowd there. I've still got two days to get through in this ghastly town. Well, good-bye, Monsieur. You'll be there in time for the ten a.m. train?'

La Bare had got down the first flight of stairs when he heard Federspiel call from above:

'Monsieur le Marquis—I have one scruple!' As he spoke the tutor leaned over the sordid banister. 'If ever the dogma of papal infallibility is promulgated—then I couldn't make my Easter communion.'

'What's that? Surely that isn't on the cards?'

'Yes, I think so. In fact, I'm afraid that in three years it will be an established fact.'

La Bare let his eyes wander over the imitation marble which sullied the wall above the chestnut-colour panelling. He was troubled as if by some unbearable new vexation—one fresh demand upon him after so many. That old, implacable rancour which he cherished against Pius VII and the Papacy for crowning Napoleon when the Bourbons were outlaws, revived in his heart once more. He turned round and looked up the stairs into the clear eyes of the tutor.

'Is this—are you serious?'

'Yes.'

'Well, in that case,' averred the Marquis, 'there'll be two of us. I'll see you on Tuesday, then.'

On the Tuesday they met at the station, and La Bare burst out laughing. Each of them was loaded with a similar package—a cylindrical package a yard and a half long. Federspiel's revealed through its wrappings the gleam of bronze and metal. The Marquis recollected his sporting tastes.

'A gun's not good enough for you then?' he chuckled. 'You prefer a cannon?'

'This is for the stars,' replied Federspiel, with a gentle smile. 'It's a telescope, and I value it too much to let it go into the guard's van. It's from the hand of Mademoiselle Herschel herself; she spent four years perfecting the mirrors. I'll keep it on my lap for the whole journey.'

'Mine,' explained the Marquis, 'is a black beech—a copper beech. I wanted to see it dug up, and I shall

replant it myself. I have my secrets. I take the tree's bearings by compass, and put it back in the soil facing the same way. It settles down more quickly. It's all a question of position.'

Monsieur de La Bare looked carefully along the train and chose a compartment exactly in the centre. Installing himself near the door, he examined the lock. Federspiel watched him with some astonishment. The Marquis frowned a little as he explained:

'It's the eighth of March to-day, and it's an anniversary I don't care for: twenty years all but two months ago, I only thought of it when I got inside the station, on the eighth of May, Dumont—they called him d'Urville—was grilled. They don't double-lock the doors any more, so Dumont the sailor served some purpose!

'I was in the same train. At the rear, luckily, on my way to Les Grandes Faux de Versailles. Should I have escaped in the centre? Probably not. It was only a derailment, but we were going at such a speed that the carriages all smashed into each other—like frightened sheep, and they caught fire—it was outside Meudon. They burnt like wooden huts, as the foresters would say. I knew Dumont very well—my father had paid for part of his education—but I couldn't recognize him in the few cinders they showed me. He only stood five foot six, but I never saw a bigger rascal. A braggart and a hot-head. We met on one occasion—he was all for Republican ideas, you know—and he made a point of thanking me publicly for all we'd done for him. He was playing the "man of the people" part—"merit rising from the gutter", and so forth. Actually, he came from quite a decent little family. So I let him have it. "It's well known," I said, "that my people have never placed any one of any value." And, of course, I expected him to challenge me so that I could give him a hiding. That would have adjusted any difference of class! But he swallowed the insult and nothing happened!

'The King—Charles X—put him in his place: he was

trying to be familiar when he took his exiled Majesty on board his boat at Cherbourg. Though Bonnechose got his hit in first. Dumont wanted the good-byes to be got over as quickly as possible, and he was bundling the last of the faithful away as if they'd been a lot of hawkers. "Hurry up!" he cried. "*Pressons, pressons!* Hurry along there!" Bonnechose made a grim pun of it. "*Pressons—la gachette?*" he said. "Let's pull the trigger, you mean?" The poor devil saw the point, and fell silent. It was in order to avoid him that I got into the last coach on the train. There he was, swaggering about the platform with his "lady" and his son. He saved my life. A *déclassé*—a scummy lot, aren't they? Every one to his own rank.'

'With the exception of the genius!' replied the German; 'and they often come to a bad end. I'm of your opinion with regard to the social climber, though I'm always ready to respect the man who's come down in the world of his own free will.'

'H'm.'

'In the latter case—that of the man who from a high position descends to a more modest one—men like that can refine a whole race. The Rhineland was ennobled by your *émigrés*, and so it remains. The lower classes there are the most polished in Germany, thanks to your aristocrats, who became colporteurs, masons and artisans. Then again, Prussia is the most fanatical region of Germany, for having absorbed into its masses the French bourgeois protestants who fled from Louis XIV's persecutions. And fanaticism, painful as it may be to meet, is a fine source of great works. . . .'

But by now the Marquis was asleep.

Madame de La Bare quickly took to the new tutor, though at first his bearing and his formal courtesy rather astonished her. His manners were strangely ceremonious and so perfect that they raised him above his caste. Upon his arrival, when the young woman held out her hand,

Federspiel bowed with a grave solemnity, and, raising it an inch or two, placed his lips upon it. Thus he achieved a *baise-main* perfectly worthy of the quality of Madame: this was no tribute to an old woman, it was rather an immediate and instinctive homage. The Marquis, who was watching out of the corner of his eye, appreciated the gesture.

While the children took the tutor off to his room, Amélien, before running away to plant his beech-tree, glanced inquiringly at his wife—who nodded.

‘Capital! The Marquis de Champcey d’Hauterive, at forty! If we had a daughter, now . . . we’d have to be careful!’

‘He’s certainly used to good society, Simone. He’s been with the Bonalds and stayed at Beaumesnil.’

And two days later, the tutor had completely won Madame’s heart. She had been an admiring audience at two of his lessons. La Bare, never slow in his likes and dislikes, felt a growing affection for this fellow, beneath whose calm manner he divined a deep integrity and reserve. One small point had particularly pleased him. The German had asked the children to take him to the family tombs, as he wished to pay his respects to the ancestors—an old custom which was going out of use.

‘He’s obliging in the extreme—and yet perfectly dignified about it,’ the Marquis said, next day, to his wife, as he was working at his desk. ‘He wanted to help the boys get the horses out.’ (Two of the grooms were ill.) ‘I told them to give him your mare, Simone. He’s not very heavy, poor devil, and the children will keep an eye on him.’

He got up from his chair and began walking to and fro, with that bustling air so characteristic of him. From his lips came his habitual slight buzzing noise—the nearest he permitted himself to a whistle in his wife’s presence: ‘One only whistles in the stables.’

‘The only thing that worries me is that I’m not too

sure what to call him. "Monsieur Federspiel"—I must remember that it isn't Ferspiel—it's such a mouthful. I'll end up by calling him just "Federspiel"—on a cordial note—eh? Meanwhile I won't call him anything.' (The Marquis could put a thousand shades of significance into the way he 'called' people.)

Hearing horses' hoofs on the gravel outside, he glanced out of the window.

'Well I'm——!'

'What is it?'

'Our "Doktor" has a very nice seat.' Madame de La Bare, too, approached the window. The three riders were going down the drive, riding abreast, the tutor between his two charges.

'Not a bad seat at that! A bit too much Newcastle about it, perhaps, ankles too stiff—why! . . . Of course! That's the Uhlan style. But look at that back!'

They were going now at a trot—the test of a rider, when it is so easy for the novice to sway and sag ignominiously. But the German was holding his mount with an effortless skill that made Manfred's attitude appear strained in comparison.

The Marquis glanced at his wife.

"*Mon cher ami*," he said, 'that's what I'll call him.'

Such were the auspices under which this unknown stranger began his sojourn here; this stranger who never lost his air of mystery but whose charm won him the friendship of the whole district. He was never invited to balls or festivities, for it was feared that he would not enjoy them. But when he had given up his post as tutor to the young La Bares, he was still regularly invited to stay at the neighbouring châteaux. He would arrive on foot, with his carpet bag, to be installed in a room which was always reserved for him, and there he would spend four or five days with the Bonnechoses, or at Saint-Quentin or Beaumesnil. These people treated him like a rather learned cousin, with whom they were on terms of

sufficient affection to tease him for his learning . . . until the dreadful days of 1870, when 'that' happened—an extraordinary event of which one can but record the nature and the results.

It led every one to suspect this simple fellow of a romantic past. And ever afterwards the uneasy respect with which he was treated never disappeared, in spite of all his efforts to conjure it away. For which reason he retired from their world.

But at this period nothing—except his manners—had hinted at any mystery. Although one remark of his, expressed in the following special circumstances, might have been taken as evidence of its existence. But it was only later that it was remembered and its significance recognized.

Four years after his arrival, when it had come to be quite understood that the German would always remain at La Bare, Federspiel asked for a private talk with the Marquis. He announced that he intended to marry a humble peasant girl from Montreuil, remarkable enough, indeed, for her intelligence and her beauty. 'A man shouldn't live entirely alone,' he said. 'I shall go and see her on Saturdays.' (In this he was as good as his word.)

Notwithstanding his own predilection for rustic flowers, the Marquis found the idea of this marriage nothing short of idiotic, and he implored Federspiel to reconsider it.

The tutor listened gravely enough.

'But what a terrible *mésalliance* for a person like yourself!' the Marquis protested.

At this Federspiel's melancholy smile flickered back to his lips.

'Monsieur le Marquis,' he answered, with a faintly perceptible hauteur, 'there are people who, even in marrying a Rieusses, would marry beneath them. Must I understand that this marriage would close the doors of

La Bare to me? My wife would not set foot outside her home. . . .'

Amélien appreciated his superbly arrogant tone, and ended by begging him to marry a dozen shepherdesses if he had the mind to, so long as he would continue to partner him at chess.

To Madame de La Bare this marriage appeared regrettable, but at the same time a noble gesture. She knew how easy it was in this region to get married 'behind the mayor's back'. Every week, Madame Federspiel received a present of game and delicacies from the château. But when it came to flowers, the Marquise herself, on Saturday mornings, would load the 'German husband' with blooms, and the tutor could be seen striding along the road, his coat-tails flapping in the wind, with a bouquet bigger than a cabbage, and heavier too.

Federspiel took an immediate liking to Gaston, and his tender feeling for the younger boy surpassed even the lively interest he took in his brother. Perhaps he felt that Gaston, at the beginning of his adolescence, needed a guide and a support—a conscience, as it were, outside himself, and more virile than his own. Federspiel apparently urged him to enter more into the life of the world around him and to enjoy himself. One of his letters (which was never sent), urging him to return to La Bare to take part in some festivities, is both ingenious and sensible. 'One can always end one's life in solitude,' he writes, 'but that is not the way we ought to begin it. The tallest trees grow in the forests.'

Manfred, popular with every one, had no need of such guidance: at his present age his natural dandyism was at its height. One realized, with a pleasurable shock, that his ready acceptance of convention was, in fact, ironical. He went his way, charming, dispassionate, slow in words, reticent of expression. While Gaston writhed and struggled with life, a blushing and fidgeting youth, tormented by his shyness, his desire to do right.

He had grown all at once—shot up over Manfred's head: it was difficult to think of him as so much younger, and his nervous debility seemed all the more abnormal.

But he kept all the freshness of his spirit; he could be touching—and ridiculous; some laughed at him, others were moved. His simplicity of soul was complete.

The Marquis had expressed the desire that Federspiel—whose fund of knowledge he now supposed to be inexhaustible—should arm his sons for the defence of the faith. In former times, a suit of chain-mail and a stout helmet would have been sufficient for the purpose, but to-day, argument was the only weapon. Good, solid laymen's arguments, that was what was needed. 'No need to turn them into models of Saint Thomas Aquinas—that way you'd be just as likely to produce a pair of plain Saint Thomases. All I want is for them to be able to confound the disciples of Calvin.'

'I've hardly the necessary books for that, Monsieur le Marquis.'

'Oh—just ask my wife for some.'

And one day, during the course of these lessons, to the preparation of which the German devoted much secret care, the studious party left safe ground to venture into the less explored territory of the guardian angels. A strongly animated Gaston spoke of these supernatural presences with a most moving enthusiasm. The two others eyed him anxiously as they listened.

'When I was little,' laughed the tall youth with the face of a child, 'I was so careful for their sake that I would never slam a door. I thought that was the reason why we were always made to come back when we slammed a door after us. I was afraid of pinching my guardian angel's wings! But nowadays,' he went on, confused at having embarked upon this subject, 'I feel something quite different, but just as strong. For me'—he closed his eyes—'there are six of us in this room.'

Manfred looked towards the tutor, on whom his brother's words had made a deep impression. He opened his lips to speak, but Federspiel preceded him:

'You are privileged in your faith, Gaston. I could wish I were more like you.'

A little gasp came from Manfred—a quick intake of breath, as if he were about to say something. But he kept silent.

Gaston went out of the room in search of some books. He left a charged silence behind him. At last Federspiel spoke, with a gentle smile:

'I wonder if I'm not caught between the too much and the too little?' he said. 'Has Manfred de La Bare ever experienced anything like his brother's convictions?'

'Neither he nor any other male La Bare, monsieur. I myself am endowed with the hereditary "double knee"—a sort of additional knee-cap which has never made prayer a very easy matter for the La Bares. They say that this "bony protuberance" is the result of the chafing of the riding-boots—or the greaves, when we wore armour. Gaston is an anomaly. A good many of our women may have felt what he feels. We must wait till he's a man.'

Federspiel was somewhat uneasy. 'What can we do for Gaston?' he went on, in a serious tone—for Manfred's advice was usually good. 'Can we help him? How about a little opposition?'

'Let's just take him as he is. There have been times when I've found it difficult, I must admit. I've argued it out with myself this way: he's a born mystic, just as he's a born horseman. In the ordinary way, the two never go together. But in him—why! we've got a Centaur of God!' He laughed to himself. 'And then again, poor little chap, he's so sensitive that it would be cruel to withdraw any support we can give him. . . . But I don't think my own presence at these theological disputations is very useful, monsieur.'

'I'm hardly equal to my task, I fear,' replied Federspiel humbly.

'On the contrary, monsieur. Tell me quite simply that religion has survived all tests and is an excellent thing, and I'll fall into line much more easily.'

'But you must remember, Manfred, the practical side isn't the only one. Religion isn't only the surest moral guide—as proved by the conduct of good Christians. It means worship, too, devotion that lifts up the heart, unceasing adoration. A life of love, Manfred—of loving service.'

There was a slight change of expression in Manfred's smiling face.

'Loving service!' he said, 'and praising God—under pain of death!' He shot a glance at his tutor: they had just completed their study of the German pre-Romantics. 'The hat of Gessler, monsieur,' he added, half aloud.

Federspiel gave it up.

Gaston came back with the Epistles of Saint Paul. He turned over the pages reverently, and once more Federspiel was aware of the wide gulf which existed between these two brothers. Manfred had made his choice—on that mysterious day when on the great high road of life two temptresses await the traveller. But his brother? Between what agonizing alternatives did his soul hover still?

Perhaps it would have been better to intervene: not in order to turn him aside from that dolorous way, but, should he wish to take it, to send him on his journey armed and fortified. Without doubt, the strange tutor realized this and tried to help. There is proof of it in his letter to Gaston. But at the same time his own uneasiness, his metaphysical researches, which bore too great an affinity to the deep urgency of Gaston's problems, may, in some unfelt manner, have urged the boy forward. Madame's mysticism, on the other hand, struck a faintly authoritative note, and might of itself have provoked a

reaction in Gaston, bringing about that crisis when youth rebels against the ideas in which it has been brought up in order to find its own truth; had not the reserve of the master of the house, his concern with the great problems of religion and his respect for them, unconsciously attracted his son, through a subtle diffusion of ideas.

CHAPTER XII

THE SULTANA

WITHIN the château, the Marquis was the god of wrath, and Manfred and Gaston the saints, interceding for men at his all-powerful throne. Through them came requests for favours, for days off, for leave to do this or that: it was to them that the timid prayers were addressed. The women appealed through Manfred, while Gaston was the acknowledged patron saint of the stable-folk. And the sons would choose the auspicious moment to present the servants' petitions to their father. In this procedure La Bare took quite a regal pleasure; he would not yield without argument or without a show of severity. He liked to be feared, though—curiously enough—much as he enjoyed his power, he hated to mete out a refusal. Often he would make a point of telling the man personally of some favour granted. But on the rare occasions when he had to refuse, he let his sons play the rôle of sympathetic intermediaries to soften the blow.

Gaston heard all the confidences of the grooms, all their joys and troubles. If at five o'clock, when the horses were first fed, Matlaw the coachman noticed that one of them refused his corn and was tossing his head, he would wait anxiously for six o'clock to strike, knowing that the château would then be accessible to him. Taking off his shoes, he would go up to Gaston's room on the second floor and scratch on his door. (At La Bare this and not knocking was the custom.)

'What is it?' would come the worried voice of the bad sleeper.

The man would stoop down and put his great mouth

to the keyhole as if he wanted to blow up the little room like a bellows.

'It's Matlaw here, Master Gaston,' he whispered, on one such occasion. 'It's about Rupert' (Rupert, one of the Mecklenbergers); 'he's blowing over his corn.'

'I'll be there,' came the reply. An intense modesty made it distasteful for Gaston to be seen in bed even by one of his own sex. 'I'm not surprised. The feed at Laigle yesterday was on the black side. I'll come now.'

With Gaston on the spot a strange scene began. As usual on these occasions, he went into the stables and spoke to the horse exactly as if he had been the family doctor: he comforted it with a sprightly bedside manner, and after looking the animal over arrived at a rough diagnosis. Then, still chatting gaily to his patient, he proceeded to feel over it with a gentle, caressing hand. He looked into the eyes, turning them first to face the light and then towards the white wall so that he might examine the retina. The tongue came next: with surprisingly skilled fingers he pulled up the lip and looked at it. While the stable-folk, caps in hand, looked on with bated breath. Sometimes, when he could find no signs of any particular disorder, Gaston looked farther: with his own body he would imitate the suffering attitude of the horse, bending and swelling himself, almost on all fours, his long spine horizontal, his big neck outstretched. . . . By some strange physical mimicry he became almost a horse himself. His lips would lengthen and droop, expanding into that prehensile equine rudiment of a trunk. Was the horse's trouble the more apparent to him when thus he copied its very attitude? At last he got up, his diagnosis made, but though his decision was firm, his voice shook as he prescribed:

'It's a colic. Warm cider, and flannels round the belly.'

At eight o'clock the Marquis's heel clicked on the cement floor of the stable yard.

'What's this? One of them ill?'

'M'sieur Gaston came and saw——'

‘Fine. How’s the Sultana?’

La Bare and Manfred had the same high opinion of Gaston’s abilities as the grooms: they never admitted it, they never discussed it, at least, not with the enthusiasm of the stable-folk, but the truth was that they would never make an important decision without first consulting their fourteen-year-old veterinary surgeon. If it were a question of buying a horse, for instance, the Marquis, smock worn loose, peasant fashion, and hat over his ear, would covertly watch Gaston’s impressions as he ran a critical eye over the candidate for the honour of entering La Bare. (No horse-coper in Perche would have attempted to swindle him—it was a distinction to be able to sell him a horse at all.) Gaston, now in the clumsiest stage of adolescence and too tall for his age, would be doing a kind of nervous pyrrhic dance round the animal, stroking him here, prodding him there, darting a quick hand under the belly. . . . And then there would be something like the following conversation.

‘Well, what d’you think of him, Gaston?’

‘I’m not sure—how do you feel about it, papa?’
(No enthusiasm!)

The Marquis in his turn would take up the inspection again, for appearance’ sake, seeking all the while for a tactful phrase. At length, he would turn to the would-be vendor:

‘Now listen, my lad, you’ve got a nice horse there, but he wants a bit more body to him.’ Then, over a cordial handshake, ‘We’ll have another look at him come Saint Catherine’s Day.’

‘You were right, papa. His heart beats at a touch. Not much of a stayer.’

A great equine event was expected at La Bare: an event of such importance as to thrust Rupert’s malady into the background. Sultana was about to foal.

It will be common knowledge to the reader that the

term thoroughbred embraces two breeds: those horses generically known as Arabs, and that famous English strain evolved from crossing with Turkish or Persian stallions. Rather confusingly, the same origin is attributed to all the English horses in that golden book, the breeders' guide—the Stud Book. In fact, the breed sprang from three horses: Arabian I; Turk; Arabian II (the Godolphin Arabian, so called after its owner, the Earl of Godolphin). All three were brought to England at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

These three ancestors were Asiatic-Arabs, closely akin to the Persians. The Barb, on the other hand, which though smaller seemed to enjoy the same reputation as the English thoroughbred does to-day ('The Barb dies without growing old,' Amélien would say) was the African Arab, almost Moroccan.

The capture of Algiers and the occupation of the country had made it possible for one of Tainchebraye's friends to present him with an Algerian stallion which corresponded strikingly to the traditional—if uncertain—description of the Barb.

In one of the *salons* of Versailles there is a painting by Mignard (1672) of a Barb which, for a century, was accepted as the finest example of its type. For a long time Roger de Tainchebraye had been looking for a stallion like this.

Here, it was a question of experiment and not of reference to the Stud Book—he was too independent to bow down to the breeders' oracle too slavishly. Tainchebraye's reputation released him from the financial considerations which impose caution on the breeder; the products of his stable were recognized as the finest in Normandy. Sultana, a thoroughbred mare, had therefore been covered by the Algerian, and the forthcoming birth was awaited like that of an heir to a great line.

She was closely watched, walked gently, and given every care. And, indeed, you would have thought that the good lady, conscious of her high destiny, was not quite so easy

in her mind this time as on the two other similar occasions she had known. Rightly or wrongly, the third foal was supposed to have the best chance—even though this theory cast something of a slur on the first-born's legitimate rights. With the birth now only a matter of hours, no one stepped outside the confines of La Bare. Sultana had already exceeded the usual time limit of eleven months and as many days as the mare had years. And yet that fact, too, was no inauspicious one. Delay sometimes means a rarer product for which Nature is taking her time.

The three La Bares and the head groom would take turns to watch the mare day and night. As the moment approached, all four gathered in the stable—Gaston, too, though he was only fourteen years old. Procreation and birth held no mystery for him. It was something very wholesome, very simple, and at the same time something to be regarded with respect: one spoke of it in lowered tones, it is true, but so one did in referring to any other serious matter.

All four were dressed alike in peasant smocks with the sleeves cut out to leave the arms bare. A big enamel basin of oil stood ready on a barrel, deep enough for the entire arm to be plunged into it at once; for it was vitally important that the actual birth must take no longer than ten minutes. If it should prove necessary to 'turn' to foal, perhaps the men would leave the task to the boy. Night was falling. They had brought in all the lamps from the drawing-room, and in the amber-lit stable their various globes were grouped like constellations.

And Sultana, suddenly calmer, was delivered without difficulty. The foal—a strange cluster of limbs, an awkward little live bundle of legs and neck and ears—was chocolate in colour and shone like varnish, with white patches that might be stockings or head markings . . . the details were indiscernible.

They let the mare lick him clean before they touched him. This she did with very gentle, almost imploring

glances towards the men. 'You'll be good to my baby, won't you, my friends?' she seemed to say. Gaston, his big mouth at a wry angle, began to cry a little. La Bare deeply moved, was gnawing his huge underlip. At length they could see fairly clearly that the offspring was a superb bay, with smoky patches of which they could not with any certainty distinguish the outline. Gaston took the lamp, and placing his hand over the shade lest he should dazzle the new-comer and its mother, brought the light nearer. Suddenly he bent over the little one's shoulder, with a sharp cry of astonishment which he could not check. He rose, very pale.

'Ah!' he sighed.

'What is it?' murmured the three others, in an alert but carefully lowered tone.

All precaution forgotten in his astonishment, Gaston bent down again. Then he straightened with the same quick movement.

'He's got the mark of the lance!' came his strangled voice; 'the lance-mark!'

This was confirmed. The two youngsters, no longer able to contain themselves, rushed out.

It was a Sunday. The grooms, together with a good many men from the farms round about, were waiting outside for news.

'The lance-mark!' cried Manfred, and he, usually so calm—the perfect dandy—began to jump for joy. The farmers, if they did not quite understand, guessed that this was good news. Every one shook hands; excitement ran high.

Less attention was paid nowadays to these 'marks' on a horse by experts in matters equine; but in such a strongly traditionalist house as La Bare, they still counted for a very great deal. And this mark above all.

A Barb, belonging to an Arab prince in the fifteenth century (some more romantic spirits made it Solomon himself!), after winning the admiration of all Syria

and North Africa, had been wounded in battle, between the shoulder and the neck—so seriously as to retire him from active service. Put to stud, he sired some incomparable chargers, and certain of his descendants—the finest—bore a mark similar to that scarred wound. Let us call this a ‘collective hallucination’, in order to dispose of the horde of witnesses who have described the mark. Sometimes it was a slight misplacement of two or three tufts of hair outlining a lozenge shape; sometimes, a little indentation unaccounted for by the play of the muscles; sometimes, a heart-shaped bump, like a scar.

However this may have been, Sultana’s foal could show a lozenge-shaped patch on the left shoulder, where the hairs curved to enclose a slight indentation in the centre of which glistened a few white hairs. The most sceptical could not deny it—here was a faint mark which might have been left by some ancient wound: it was as irrefutable as the traces of a broken knee.

The mare was growing uneasy.

‘You stay with her, Matlaw,’ said La Bare. ‘We’ll be off now. I’ll see that you get something to drink.’

Outside, beneath the starry night, darted the shadowy forms of the excited men. When the Marquis appeared, sweating and triumphant, two of the grooms yelled, ‘Vive le Roi!’ The Marquis took off his hat and shouted it too. The farmers, in somewhat milder tones, took up the cry.

‘At five o’clock to-morrow morning, Jeannot, you’ll take a letter full speed to Monsieur le Comte de Tainchebraye. In the meantime, let’s have some wine!’

And so the merrymaking proceeded; while Madame de La Bare looked on indulgently, with a slight flicker of raillery at the corner of her eyelid, and a tiny frown too. No doubt she knew only too well how her Amélien’s enthusiasm would end.

And at that very moment the world, the old world

that these people trod so surely, was slowly, implacably, crumbling beneath them. Everything that in their eyes marked the beauty, the quality, the higher necessities of their civilization, was disintegrating. If they were sometimes vaguely aware of the change, how little they appreciated its ominous aspect! Perhaps on that very same evening, Karl Marx was finding translators for his *Observations on Political Economy*: perhaps on some sordid table in some lost quarter of London the manuscript pages of *Das Kapital* were piling up. A cerebral hæmorrhage was about to paralyse the enormous body of which these countrymen, who had stuck to their creative part, remained the healthiest members. The great body, for neglect of its old healthy practices and the want of the remedies it had once used, was perishing. . . . Here, too, amid the infinite, disquieting tranquillity of the countryside, it sank slowly into death.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GHOST

MIDNIGHT found Amélien pleading with his wife.

'I hope you don't mind. But I simply had to tell Roger. Of course, he may not come—he may not even reply.'

'Don't worry, I should like to see him again.'

For Roger de Tainchebraye, the man of the mask, no longer got on so well with the people of his world. A strange social phenomenon had risen up against him. No one had thought of banishing him, and the old man would have met with as much indulgence as the young. The aura of a Don Juan with which society had crowned him would have grown even brighter towards the close of his life. But the 'gentleman of love' had sought a voluntary exile: he had gone to Coventry of his own accord. And so society treated him as if he had confessed to some grave crime.

'Yes . . . I should like to see him again,' murmured Madame de La Bare pensively. 'I only met him once. It was during the early days of our marriage, on one of our visits. Do you remember, Amélien?'

'I can't say I do.'

'It was at Merlerault, during the Easter fair. He was on horseback, riding slowly through the crowd—and it opened up to make a way for him'—she paused—'as if he had been a ghost. He was looking at no one—his eyes were far away, right above the crowd, as if he was sure of finding the path clear for his horse. And I remember you trying to catch up with him, to introduce him to me—but the crowd wasn't so docile for you.'

'Yes, I remember,' said La Bare.

'Is he still with that woman?'

'So they say. But they don't call her "that woman" now. She commands more respect. She's Mademoiselle Aimée.' . . . La Bare hesitated dreamily. 'She's been devoted to him for thirty years—a lovely girl like that!'

'Lovely?'

'Yes. She's twenty-five years younger than he is—at least that. And even the gossips have never been able to couple her name with any one else. You could call that a great love! And if you knew!'

'What?'

'Nothing . . . after all, I don't "know" myself. Whatever the truth is, Roger is as much loved and respected in his little corner as the King in the Louvre. He'll just send me his congratulations, I suppose, and that'll be the end of it. Shall we go to sleep?'

But the tranquil Simone was no longer sleepy.

'There are a good many like him,' she went on reflectively, 'among the people we know. Their hearts are better than their morals. And Roger—in spite of everything—always contrived to give even his excesses a sort of grandeur. What a strange sin is the sin of the flesh!'

A commentary in this vein was not at all to Amélien's liking. He tried to divert the trend of his wife's thoughts, but with little success. She would always come back to Tainchebraye, for along with other chaste women she had an avid, uneasy curiosity in regard to such shameless enormities. And Amélien, though content to be forgotten, was at the same time somewhat irritated at being displaced by 'that man' in his wife's thoughts.

Jeannot came back with a let

'MY DEAR AMÉLIEN' (it ran),

'How could I resist the temptation of accepting your invitation, and the satisfaction of paying my respects to our little Sultan? Unfortunately a series of urgent engagements forces me to choose the day instead of you—this Saturday. If you find that you have to go out, perhaps you would be kind enough to leave instructions so that I may have a look at the young fellow.

'I should, however, very much like you to have presented me to your wife, if such a visit, nineteen years after your marriage, when it should have been paid, will not prejudice her too much against her wild old cousin.

'Please convey to her my best respects, and accept, my dear Amélien, my sincerest good wishes.

TAINCHEBRAYE

'*PS.*—May I suggest you don't let the mare drink too much. It would also be wise to see that her water is tepid, and mix a little bran in it.'

'Well?' asked Simone.

'He's coming on Saturday,' replied her husband, 'but he gives us an excuse for keeping out of the way if we don't want to meet him. . . . Not that I should for one minute dream of taking it,' he added, for a single glance at his wife's face was enough.

He read the letter again before passing it to her, muttering:

'He's still got plenty of cheek! Fancy telling me—me!—how to look after Sultana!'

But the angry tone did not ring quite true. His wife was surprised. If any one else had dared to give such counsel his letter would have been sent flying to the ceiling, accompanied by a storm of mumbled curses. But here, the chief recognized a suzerain.

Manfred greeted the news of the coming visit with very lively interest, if not with positive excitement.

He was all for giving Tainchebraye the most cordial and lavish of welcomes. They were at lunch, and Madame de la Bare, who was sitting next to him, watched all the signs of his enthusiasm. The young man was not ignorant of the amorous renown which surrounded the man with the mask. Manfred was changing: something, some shade of delicacy seemed to have left him now. His verdicts were losing their indulgence, or, to be more exact, they were losing the restraint which had been an outcome of a basic tolerance. He had become somewhat peremptory in his decisions: he was still calm, but a touch of ruthlessness characterized him.

'A man! He's becoming a man,' she thought, not without fear, and into this word 'man' slipped something of a personal repugnance; she was alarmed in her purity.

Gaston, sitting there quietly, but taut as a violin string—all eyes, all ears, all his imagination awakened—was following every word that was said about Tainchebraye. And his mother realized now what that sheltered, family upbringing had done for him. Manfred, who went out a lot, had learned a good deal from contact with the world—but his brother . . . ? Never in front of him had his family spoken at any length about the Masked Lover: though he must have heard more than a word or two in the stables, Tainchebraye being almost a legend among the peasants. But, to judge by his first question, it seemed that after all the child was only moved by pity.

'Poor man,' he said. 'Does he still have to wear his mask?'

'Yes,' replied the Marquis, 'and nobody nowadays, I believe, could tell you exactly what his wounds were. Except that the poor chap hasn't got half an inch of nose left. His face was smashed by the horses' hoofs. Three charges went over him.'

'And he lives all alone? Didn't any woman have the courage to marry him—to help him?'

There was a slight pause. Manfred put an end to it with the decisiveness of a champion entering the lists on behalf of the fair sex.

'Yes,' he said, 'nearer twenty than one. But he didn't want them,' he added fiercely, changing sides; 'he despised their pity, their generosity.'

'Why, Manfred! Why are you so excited? After all, your uncle——' cried Madame de La Bare.

'For us, mother, Uncle Roger is rather a hero—he *is* a hero.' This with a touch of bravado.

'But not a model, I hope?'

'We haven't the time nowadays to contemplate models, mother—perhaps we haven't the courage either.' He found his old gentleness again, that protective bantering tone whose warmth he always played upon his mother. 'The pace is too quick for that. We have to shape ourselves as we go along.'

The next Saturday, from dawn onwards, the whole household was aflutter, from the kitchens to the stables. The grooms had obtained permission to set out the coat of arms on the paving-stones: this might be a sad waste of time, but it was the pride of the stable-folk. With the aid of stencils and coloured sawdust they achieved the family shield and its quarterings. To these loyal souls, Tainchebraye's visit meant more than that of a cardinal to a priest. The chambermaids nervously bit their lips. Ferline alone remained calm, and sent the cook about her business when she asked for three dozen dish-cloths instead of her usual score.

Manfred had been busy for two days doing the 'outside': he had been made responsible for the tidying-up of the avenue, the paths, the lawns and the hedges. It was usually difficult to insist upon a high standard in such work because, to the Norman workmen, there was 'no profit in it'. La Bare had decanted his Burgundy, strained his Chambertin into carafes, as in the olden days was the custom at Versailles, and uncorked a dozen

bottles before sniffing out the 'Constance'—his guest's odd favourite—from the piles in his cellar. Gaston was 'fifth wheel'. He wondered if all this were being done in simple homage, or whether its underlying purpose were not to impress the visitor. Nine o'clock had no sooner struck than he went up to see Manfred. His brother was at last dressing in his room which 'always smelled so nice'. Gaston was wearing his best suit. 'Is it all right to wear this, Manfred?' he asked. 'It's new.'

Manfred considered.

'I think the best thing for you to do would be to keep on your riding-breeches, like me. Now just a moment—remember that Uncle will probably come on horseback, although he's getting an old man. He's been screwed to a horse for so many years that you won't unseat him now! And when you're entertaining any one, the thing is to make 'em feel as much at ease as possible. Don't ever let 'em feel that they've come in the wrong clothes.'

'My breeches are ever so old,' said Gaston humbly.

'That doesn't matter. The master of the house should never be so well dressed as his guest. It's the valets that you dress up in their best, old chap!'

'All right. But it's a complicated business. I thought that if I put on my best suit I'd be honouring the guest—just as you've been smartening up the house and the park, Manfred.'

'But if I put you to shame by coming out in better style than you,' replied Manfred, imitating his brother's falsetto, 'I'm not giving you a very friendly reception, am I?'

'You're always right, Manfred. Oh, Manfred! you've polished your nails! I've never seen you with your nails polished!'

'Well, that's because . . . well, you'd never guess what a personage old Uncle Roger was once. Madame de Brigode—she laughs at every one—but you listen

when she's talking about him! And when she calls him the "Gentleman of Love"! But those things won't interest you yet. Let me get on with my dressing.'

The young people were ready hours too soon. Uncle Tainchebraye had to come a good thirty miles, and therefore had the right to be a little late—though Manfred was sure he would come ahead of the time he had given. And so it proved. At a quarter past ten Manfred called from his vantage-point:

'Here he is! Papa, look! On horseback.'

La Bare, who had not quite finished knotting his cravat, swore, and stepped back from his open window in order not to be seen.

At the extreme end of the avenue a dim silhouette stirred among the light and shade of the trees: horses, coming at a walking pace towards the château. At five hundred yards you could make out the black mask. This was too much for the young people: they ran to hide among the laurels round the summer-house, where they could watch unseen.

The horse was a fine, huge brown bay, which shone in the sunlight like a piece of old tarnished silver and tortoiseshell. The rider, a tall figure, dressed in grey velvet from head to foot, rode with a regal nonchalance. Slim as a young man, with the shoulders of an athlete and the waist of a girl, he seemed to be wearing the powder of long ago on his hair and on the white beard that sprang from beneath the mask. His left hand was at his hip; his right, immobile, held the reins. His white gloves were gauntleted with finely stitched cuffs. White, too, was the harness, even to the saddle, intensifying the shining black-and-silver of the horse. His coat was a long one and the buttons were gold. He wore no riding boots; the breeches continued, jodhpur fashion, to his ankles, and again, it was gold buttons which terminated them. A wave of white lace at his neck was pinned with a gleaming medallion.

Behind him, on a solid if less princely mount, rode an old huntsman in green livery, with belt and hunting-knife, white leather breeches and knee boots. A huge scar from cheek to chin cut his two lips into four.

The rider came forward slowly, letting his mount choose his own pace—that peculiar loose walk a thoroughbred has. More slowly still, he turned his head and looked around him—as if to renew acquaintance with surroundings that had once been familiar. He glanced up at the roof—with a smile; then at the windows, one by one. Then, lowering his head and that masked face, he looked at the lake, and the swans. And at length he came to the centre of the terrace and stopped, waiting. Man and horse stood immobile—and against that great landscape they made up together an equestrian statue dedicated to nobility of race—a thoroughbred, and a man worthy of such a mount. There was hardly a quiver to show that the horse was not made of bronze. . . .

The children disappeared through the servants' door.

Amélien flew down the stairs, feverishly buttoning his waistcoat as he went. Then out to greet the visitor. The children saw Monsieur de Tainchebraye, with an almost imperceptible movement, lower his horse's head: while with a suppleness and a rapidity which made the action almost invisible, he slipped his left leg over the saddle-bow—and stood on the ground. This fashion of dismounting enjoyed, it is true, no great prestige, but the incredible ease of the gesture, and its efficacy, too, seeing that it landed the rider exactly in front of his host, made up for that. Tainchebraye had completely abandoned his horse—the huntsman was by now at his head.

'I'm very happy to meet you again, Amélien.'

He embraced him. Monsieur de La Bare was quite overcome, and, feeling very foolish, kept hold of his hand. Tainchebraye took off his hat and tossed it to the

hunter, who caught it with a dexterity which suggested that their movements were one. All the singularity of his appearance was now revealed: above a high forehead, almost livid over the deep black of the mask, curled a thick mass of silvery hair—it was strange, indeed, this union of the curls of youth with the white of old age.

‘Hair like Saint John’s,’ murmured Gaston.

‘Curling irons, I expect,’ explained Manfred.

That clear brow, beneath the hair that might have been a child’s, and one ear—that was all one saw of his skin. The rest was hidden beneath the beard and the mask. Through the eye-holes, the black pupils flashed with a surprising intensity.

In the presence of this duellist figure, La Bare seemed an old man. But the remarkable hair readjusted the scales: the Marquis was as yet hardly grey.

Monsieur de Tainchebraye made the three paces to the foot of the steps—and you felt that it was only by a tremendous effort that he did not limp. Two great veins, like parallel rails, stood out on his forehead.

He turned round.

‘What a lovely place this is! And your trees have come up, Amélien. I don’t recognize those yews—or those flower-beds. So I’m here once more—and very glad to be here! Yes, it’s still my good old Jeannet.’

The Marquis shook hands with the man who was standing by with the reins under his arm.

‘He’s happy to see all this again. He’ll find his way all right. . . .’

La Bare summoned his sons; a blushing Manfred and a pale Gaston were introduced. The fine red lips smiled.

‘A posthumous godchild of poor George. I knew your godfather, my boy. Yes, George Byron was a proud fellow. And you’re a Gaston? Like my uncle! I’m anxious to pay my respects to my cousin. But I’ve come too early in the morning. I suppose you lunch at eleven, in the new style?’

Asked when he had left Tainchebraye, it was with a smile that he replied:

'Dead of night! Two o'clock, in fact. We made Bosc-du-Bois a half-way house. I wanted to see the Boucherville's old place. Ah! it hadn't La Bare's luck! Everybody's dead there; the house too. . . . Yes, we started very early, Jeannet and I—we're still two old night birds—a couple of owls; Chouans, Amélien!'

A certain constraint was still in the air. But it lifted as soon as Madame de La Bare appeared on the scene. As she came down the stairs, Tainchebraye pulled off his gloves, with a movement so quick and neat that, close-fitting as they were—almost moulded to his fingers—they clicked as they came off. He pushed them into his breast pocket and waited, hands hanging, finger-tips joined. . . His hands were white as fine wax, and delicate. A huge diamond ring gleamed on his left third finger.

Simone de La Bare appeared, and the atmosphere changed. It was gay now and gentle.

'Good morning, cousin!'

She held out both her hands in an eager, natural welcome—and Manfred realized that his mother had hit upon the only possible manner, implying that she had forgotten the past, forgotten everything but the fact that they were cousins, and that his visit afforded her a great pleasure.

Tainchebraye rose to the occasion. He kept Simone's right hand on his left palm, outstretched like an ivory spear-head, while he kissed the other with a far from imperceptible kiss (a kiss of kinship).

'Forgive me,' he said. 'I should have come long ago.'

'We are quite old acquaintances, cousin. It's eighteen years since I saw you for the first time.'

And he smiled again—with the slightest wryness.

'Yes . . . the big Percherons at Merlerault frightened you rather, didn't they? I remember how pretty your frock was, blue silk with cherry-coloured ribbons!'

'Oh! Flatterer!'

She shook a reproving finger. Amélien beamed.

The guest begged leave to go and change. Jeannet's saddle-bag was a veritable trunk, and soon he was to be seen brandishing a hot iron, mistrustful of all the maids in the linen-room. Roger de Tainchebraye came down at length in a skirted lavender coat with the flowered silk jabot that had been fashionable in the old days, into whose folds fell two fine gold chains. The trousers were banded with silk, and grey as an olive-tree at dawn. And all this was set off by the mellow charm of strength softened by age, so that Madame de La Bare felt a little pang in her heart. Her men, compared with this, were rather like rustics in their Sunday best. . . . But how well she loved them!

CHAPTER XIV

THE HERITAGE

SULTANA's foal was petted and discussed with all the enthusiasm that was to be expected. The grooms glowed with pride when the great, the illustrious 'Leather-nose' made his entry into their domain and clicked his tongue approvingly. Matlaw did not go unrecognized: his father's renown had spread beyond the boundaries of Ouche. And when the masked man left the stables, leaning on the heavy ivory cane with which he so cleverly concealed his limp (a cane which unscrewed into two pieces to fit the holsters of his saddle and which was also a sword-stick), the grooms felt proud to be working for such seigneurs, and such generous seigneurs, too. For the 'glass of wine' which Tainchebraye had deposited in Matlaw's hand would have bought a whole hogshead. The miserable *pourboire* springs in principle from that feeling of fellowship which impels a man to desire another's happiness. A natural, instinctive gesture, it gives pleasure to the one who gives and the one who receives. But now that it has become a mere convention it is intolerable to both parties.

Amélien showed the practice jumps he had had made for his youngsters, and the covered riding-school, and, as might have been expected, the afternoon saw all the riding-horses out.

'Manfred's a remarkably intelligent rider. But I'm more than proud, Roger, to show you Gaston. He knows nothing by theory and everything by instinct.'

In high excitement the two brothers showed off the horses. Manfred acquitted himself even better than usual, but it was clearly the reverse with Gaston. The

man who was watching them, however, was not one to be led astray in his judgment. He might appear only politely attentive, but in reality his perspicacious eye did not miss a single movement. He thanked Manfred with an appreciative 'Magnificent!' while his comment upon Gaston's performance was:

'Not bad, my boy! Not bad at all.'

Manfred smiled, as he remarked to his younger brother:

'Don't worry: that "not bad" meant a good deal more than my "jolly good".'

He was right. As they walked away, Roger declared to La Bare:

'Your Gaston still doesn't understand his horse—he feels with it!' And he looked back to watch with approval the close union with his mount that made the child much more than a mere rider—nothing less than a part of his horse.

Madame de La Bare persuaded Tainchebraye to stay over the Sunday as well. Lord Stream, his incomparable mount, had the box of honour, and Matlaw had obtained from Jeannet the favour of grooming him.

For Roger this visit to La Bare meant something he could not quite put into words. He felt a rare emotion, a sense of renewal; he was aware, as it were, of a resurrection of his own personality. The delicate courtesy, the cultivated ease, the graceful turn of speech, and the certainty that those around him were kindred spirits, all this was something he had not known for thirty years—for a man is only completely free within his own caste. And he was touched too by the admiration he sensed around him—an admiration rarer in quality than that which he had once received from the world. Here it was homage to the man he might have been.

'These children of yours are charming,' he remarked to Amélien as they were returning to the house. 'Have you thought at all of the future for them?'

'Yes, it's all settled. Manfred will stay here, and for Gaston there's his mother's property. We'll have to build a place for him. The Roncerays have kept the château.'

'Well, that seems simple enough. But then, you've only two. Two children at La Bare! Your ancestors wouldn't be able to believe it, Amélien!'

'No'—his host replied roundly—'and for my part, I should have liked to see the house full. But the *Code Civil* puts rather a curb on marriage! We must keep going, you know, till better times come again.'

'And at least there aren't so many deaths now,' Roger replied. 'Let's hope the Revolution will never return—or another ogre from Corsica! Still, Amélien, you get rather a shock when you come to think that there were twenty Hordons in 1760, all heads of families, and now, in 1862, there's only you!' He glanced round: the boys were stabling the horses. 'Amélien . . . aren't you surprised at being able to tempt me from my roost and bring me to La Bare with nothing more than the birth of a foal?'

'No,' smiled Amélien, 'the foal being what he is.'

'The lance-mark.' Roger smiled. 'It was partly that, certainly. But I had other ideas too. Don't interrupt me, now. I'm growing older—very much older, and I've been thinking of you and your sons. And what I've seen to-day has decided me. Really, I couldn't have seen anything to please me more. I've got through a lot and given a lot away, I know, and my fortune's gone. But I've still got Tainchebraye, with three hundred hectares—and the stud, which is going well and worth double the land. We're cousins. What would you say if I chose Gaston for an heir?'

La Bare was much too frank not to be interested, but not being of a calculating nature, he had never considered the possibility of this heritage. In any case, he had always thought that Roger would have nothing but debts to leave behind him. His pleasure now was violent

enough to make him cough, but his upbringing had prepared him for any social eventuality like this. He was able to master his emotion, and his ready wit came to his aid with a phrase that fitted the occasion neatly enough.

'That would be a magnificent gift indeed! But one that should be postponed as long as possible, for our sake, and for yours—so that the pupil may be worthy of the master.'

As they went into the house, the conversation turned to gardening.

In their bedroom that night, La Bare told his wife about this proposal. She was highly pleased. Gaston was lucky! But her husband confessed to a strong disinclination to let his sons go to stay at Tainchebraye. The thought of it frightened him! On the other hand, it would be almost impossible to prevent it. Of course, he, Amélien, would be there to advise about the horses and the stud-farm, but he could hardly deny to the testator the right of initiating his chosen heir.

'If it were Manfred,' replied Simone, 'the question would really be a more serious one. I don't know quite what is happening to him lately, it disturbs me a little. But for Gaston, it's another matter altogether. In the first place his age makes it impossible for him to leave us for long at a time. He could go there for a day now and again—and with his fervent piety it would be absolutely impossible for him to be . . . contaminated, if we can use that ugly word. . . .'

'Besides,' she went on, after a moment or two, 'has our poor Roger really merited his reputation? At all events, I'd have complete trust in him where a child was concerned. Complete trust! And I'd tell him so! He won't say a word in front of Gaston that could be in any way exceptionable.'

But La Bare grumbled:

'Complete trust! That was what two hundred women

gave him, and their hearts into the bargain. He deceived them all.'

Mass at the château next day was still more impressive than on ordinary occasions. A dark swarm of smocks overflowed from the nave and clustered at the outer door.

At four o'clock on the Saturday, Tainchebraye had agreed to stay the night, and by evening twenty farms around knew that he would be seen at mass. Moreover, in these twenty farms the masked traveller on the wonderful horse was already the topic of the day. Yet if you had asked Tainchebraye how many people he had met on his ride he would have replied 'Hardly a soul'. That is the country! No region can give you such an impression—a false impression—of solitude as this. Its open spaces are sprinkled with spying thickets and secret observation posts. The population conceals itself with an inherited caution and distrust.

Leathernose's attitude throughout the service was very correct and very respectful. He stood with arms folded, his white head overtopping the rest of the congregation. When every one sat down, a practised eye could have discerned the curiosity of the country folk; they seemed reluctant to turn round for their chairs. The simple-hearted were a little frightened of him. The farmer's wife from the home farm roused the fury of the servants (whose hearts he had won) by calling him 'an evil angel'.

Two places farther up, a little forward and to the left, Gaston was praying. Kneeling on a narrow plush-covered bench which ran beside the rail scarcely above the level of the floor, he seemed to be bowed even lower, prostrated in his fervour. He was praying for his uncle, towards whom his little soul had bounded like an affectionate dog. To him the 'hero' remained the martyr. He took the communion at his mother's side, rapt with adoration. . . .

Tainchebraye's deep black eyes looked on.

Before the guest took to the road again there was a conversation between the cousins. Then, when everything had been settled, he went up to his room to change, and returning in riding costume, sat talking to Manfred with every sign of carefree enjoyment. He became reminiscent about the Rohans, over at Beaumont—the Rohan-Rohans, the older branch, now Austrian princes. He was sitting on the big red-and-grey hall seat when the service door flew open—and Ferline appeared, carrying a cuff that had been overlooked. She stopped in surprise, having probably intended to give her find to some member of the household. For all his years, this man was still Tainchebraye. He rose and thanked her, unable to take his eyes off the girl.

As she blushed her beauty was even more striking, as if it radiated light. And her movement, as the cuff passed from hand to hand without the interruption of a tray, had a charming awkwardness, imparting to the splendid young woman something of a child's appeal. After a brief imploring look at Manfred, she fled.

Tainchebraye passed judgment in a tone which revealed astonishing depths, and an alarming range of comparisons.

'She's beautiful. I noticed her at mass.'

Manfred blushed too, but with pleasure.

'Yes,' he echoed enthusiastically, 'isn't she beautiful!' Then, regaining his reserve, 'She's Madame Lieurre's youngest daughter.'

'Ah!' replied the masked man, dropping his eyes. 'Her mother was a lovely woman. But this one!'

Then he seemed to hesitate, on the point of adding something further—and sadly he raised his head and stared at the Cassini map upon the wall. Suddenly he turned to Manfred with a glance which almost stung him. As if he could not resist it, he muttered furtively, '*Mes compliments!*' and turned his eyes to the map again.

A strange silence followed, fortunately broken by

noisy shouts from the stables. Roger turned in their direction with a little laugh on his lips.

'The departure of Lord Stream! He's not so quiet as on his arrival. I'll bet Gaston's there.'

Tainchebraye was right. Gaston came in now, laughing in high excitement and almost dancing on his long, slightly bandy legs—legs already stamped with the mark of a horseman. Yes, Lord Stream was restive. . . .

'You shall ride him, Gaston,' smiled Roger, 'I promise you. When you come over to Tainchebraye in a little while.'

The masked man said good-bye, thanking Simone in words which were unforgettable in their searing melancholy. All of them, each moved by different thoughts, watched the figures of the two riders diminishing between the trees of the avenue. The sun was sinking, glinting here and there on the horses' harness. At the last point from which you could still distinguish La Bare, Roger de Tainchebraye turned round, and they saw his hat in his outstretched hand waving to them for the last time.

CHAPTER XV

TAINCHEBRAYE

THOSE words which Manfred had pronounced with so evident a respect—'gentleman of love'—had sunk into Gaston's subconscious mind, piercing it with a wound quickly healed and hardly perceptible. And for a long time the phrase lived there, producing an effect very different from and indeed almost the opposite of its real significance. For the child, love was love, with no physical aspect—a yielding tenderness, a readiness to give unceasingly. For him all loves resembled those he knew—divine love, and family affection: effusions of the soul. And if he had the slightest insight into their inseparable physical counterpart—that strange, invincible attraction of a touch, or a kiss, that carnal attraction in which the spirit itself exalts the body, as in the hand stretched out in tenderness to a friend—he could not conceive of any other love than that absolute devotion, sanctified by the sacrament, whose bonds extend even beyond death.

And the fact that this epithet had been attached to the dazzling, the tragically maimed Tainchebraye, a figure of such melancholy fire, won him the child's attention and pity. His imagination endowed Roger with a personality of its own creation; for Gaston, he shone with a charity unsurpassed. This man of passion, this breaker of flesh, and of souls too, was invested by the child with the character of a disillusioned altruist, almost a saint. For Gaston he was a true knight, whose qualities did not stop short at courage, courtesy and an aristocratic elegance, but embraced also charity and Christian virtue. All Gaston's heroes had been saints: he canonized Don Juan.

And his attitude was not without its effect upon Roger. For here the mysteries of thought-transference or secret radiations were at work; the nameless, vibrant elements emanating from the young pious heart touched and influenced that other soul, softened now and changed by sorrows and solitude and an all-pervading remorse.

A growing physical likeness between two people is no strange occurrence. But this phenomenon can be accomplished too on a spiritual plane. La Bare made many things clear when he came out with one of his phrases:

‘It’s the halo that makes the saint.’

To see ourselves lit up by a pure light makes us ashamed of our imperfections. That refined, intuitive perception which on less worthy occasions had stood the gentleman of love in such good stead was still his. As a lover adapts himself to what is expected of him, he became aware of these emanations from the boy, and his inner being accepted them, and moulded itself on the image in Gaston’s heart—unconsciously, and only partially, perhaps, for his own old heart was too hardened. If destiny had permitted it, what might not have been achieved by a longer exposure to such influence? Madame de La Bare had seen clearly.

Gaston prayed for Roger in the chapel of the château. Imponderable projectiles, glistening like powdered stars, his prayers sped towards their goal. The fullest prayers are those of the fifteen-year-old, for mingled with them is a questing of the whole body, whose newly awakened vigour turns its first raptures heavenwards.

Madame de La Bare always kept the key of her oratory, through a strange, vague jealousy, and out of modesty, too—an attitude in which the pious servant of God merged into the woman; she locked up her room of prayer in the same way as she kept the privacy of her nuptial chamber. Gaston had the chapel to himself.

When his parents were away on visits to some neigh-

bouring château, and Gaston would come in in the evenings ready to drop with a healthy tiredness after stabling his horse, he would go to the château to find an ecstatic repose, an ineffable half-deathly state. A lamp shone there, a burning tear of blood, for there the Holy Sacrament was reserved. The tabernacle of the private oratory remained empty: the servants lived above it, so that it was not fitting for The Presence. Nothing would have been simpler than to have the rooms overhead vacated, but Madame de La Bare had not wished this to be done; it would have seemed to her an act of disrespect to bid God come here at her request for her convenience. It was for her to go to Him.

The lamp in the choir glowed the brightest in the afternoons, when as the sun left it the vaulted space above grew quickly dark. For though the morning sun poured through the clear east window, it did not reach the chapel again until the evening. Then it shone through the trees, and its arrows of light were blunted by the branches, casting sea-green shadows, which died away in a mournful haze, faintly shimmering, as under deep water.

Beneath the folds of white satin, God waited in His mystery and His solitude.

‘Here I am,’ said the little one’s heart.

And that secret immensity, that infinite tenderness, that depthless quiet, that thought which hung there, would respond:

‘Come!’

‘Well, Gaston, so you’re off to Beaujolais?’ smiled Madame de La Bare, when he had obtained leave to ride over to Tainchebraye. ‘Off to Beaujolais’ was a family catchword, meaning that the journey was to be a happy one, ‘as happy as a honeymoon’. For a long while we, too, used to use this expression at home, and I’ve often wondered since if the phrase came from a gay little book of Topffer’s, or whether, on the other hand, Topffer picked it up on one of his visits to La Bare.

So Gaston went off, taking the second coachman, who was in high delight at the prospect of such a journey. Matlaw, too important a person for the position, was miserable, and the third groom explained regretfully to his chambermaid that it was only on account of his own tender age that he had been passed over.

For a long way Gaston was familiar with the route: it was the one taken for the pilgrimage every fourteenth of August. The memory of his trance—when he had thought he was to be sacrificed like Isaac—had almost faded now. But, of what his father had said, he remembered vividly that last terrible question, that violent rebellion of the vanquished Chouan: 'What have we done to God that he is always on the other side?' Gaston found an answer quickly: 'His justice is in eternity.' But it did not completely satisfy him. Too strong a sense of temporal punishments, and the accepted morality which ordains that the punishment shall follow on the heels of the crime, had been engrained in him by his upbringing, and also by a queer little experience in his own life. Were there such things as secret sins?

But the journey, with the magnificent vistas it revealed, did not lend itself to such speculation. The mere fact that he was riding along with his valet like a grown-up gentleman—a gentleman of old—filled his thoughts. How well he knew in theory how such a journey should be made: how to be careful of girths and shoes, how to arrange the halts and the fodder, and even when his mount must be controlled by a skilful pressure of the knee.

Spring had been delayed by a long wet winter and was unfolding now with slightly feverish haste and a hint of storm. The blue vault seemed a bell-shaped forcing-glass, storing up heat for quicker growth. Only the fresh silky breeze testified to the vast expanse of the plain, the circle of the horizon being veiled and narrowed by a dull haze.

It was a pity to leave Narcisse behind: it would have

been more pleasant to ride side by side. But papa, who knew Gaston's expansiveness, had definitely forbidden it. Moreover, the man himself would probably not have agreed. The stable-folk were more loyal and more formally respectful than the indoor servants. Fleury, the butler, for instance—without his knowledge of syrups, or the secret of his *bons-bons* made with orange-flower petals, a speciality of La Bare—would he have been worth his keep?

The fields were like raked flower-beds, waiting to be planted with seedlings, ready to provide, not the baser necessities, but rather some great luxury, some splendid floral decoration to spread over all the earth—an earth freed at last from its subjugation to the exigencies of men's hunger and men's greed. Colours and petals would soon unfold in a shower of light, a glowing tapestry of interwoven silks. And Gaston remembered an old hymn that Célie used to sing :

‘ All flowers on earth
Come to us from the skies. . . . ’

Pretty Célie's married now. She has a lovely baby, and Gaston is his godfather. She doesn't sing ‘*Sous les Roses*’ any longer—it's too sad. It's ‘*Bernicot, Bernicotte*’, now, to soothe her little one to sleep. She wants a nest full of sons.

What a lovely day!

It was not until Laigle was passed that Gaston unfolded his map, and solemnly proceeded to follow an entirely wrong route. And when at length they came to Tainchebraye, it was thanks to the valet's bump of direction and his questioning tongue.

To arrive at the house, Gaston too slowed his horse to a walk and tried to put on a nonchalant air. But the avenue here ran down a steep slope, and did not provide

the same slow and dignified approach as La Bare. It was as if the drive wished to clip the wing of the château, of which you could only see a corner. When he had turned it, Gaston found himself suddenly face to face with his uncle, who was sitting at the top of the flight of steps waiting for him. The masked man jumped up eagerly.

'Hallo, Gaston! Bravo!'

The boy would have liked to throw his leg over the saddle, like him, but he did not venture to take the liberty of copying him; besides, his uncle stood on the wrong side for it. Jeannet had run up.

'Good morning, Jeannet,' Gaston cried, and shook hands with him.

'Good morning, Monsieur le Vicomte.' Jeannet gave a slight bow. Gaston was so surprised at this solemn designation that he turned and looked round for some one to whom it could have been addressed. Roger smiled.

Tainchebraye was dressed now in nothing more elegant than a thick serge, peasant-style. Gaston, remembering the brilliant dandy, was astonished. The other must have noticed his surprise.

'When you saw me last I was wearing the clothes of my best days,' he said. 'These suit me better now!'

Gaston thought of the lesson he had received from Manfred.

'I'll go and change,' he said.

'No; we're concerned with horses to-day. Besides, you'll be riding this afternoon.'

'Lord Stream?' asked the boy, in delight.

'Yes—and others! You'll see.'

Gaston was conscious of a great happiness—and naturally, for he could not know of the other man's ingenuity at bringing out one's true nature—at separating it from that defensive armour of the ego, that sad, quivering armour between oneself and reality, whose other name is fear. The gentleman of love had reassured so many timid spirits. . . .

They went into the house. The Tainchebraye château was not so magnificent as La Bare, but some fine canvases, portraits of warriors, adorned the walls, and objects of equestrian interest attracted attention whichever way one looked. Gaston stood spell-bound before a magnificent portrait of a horse: a golden chestnut who turned his head and followed you with his brown eyes.

'That's Agramant,' said his uncle, 'done by Robert de Dreux. One of the finest horses I've ever had—or even seen, for that matter. Your father ever mentioned him to you?'

'Oh yes—wasn't it Agramant that you——' Gaston was on the point of adding, 'that you had to kill yourself?' when he stopped, lest he should evoke a painful memory. And yet, none the less, his strange uncle answered, 'Yes.'

Beneath the portrait of the horse, in a little frame of black wood, there was a shoe, worn but polished to mirror brightness, and between its points, a rosette, and a thick tress of the golden mane. At the side, a bunch of blue hyacinths, freshly gathered. Gaston noted with astonishment the numerous vases of flowers standing about the room. Two large portraits also had their souvenirs and their flowers. Now Gaston could never have imagined his uncle, the man of the mask, gathering flowers. Naïvely, he remarked upon this. Tainchebraye smiled without replying.

'My father and my mother.' He indicated the portraits. Beneath that of the woman, whose hair was powdered, stood a little work-basket: beneath the naval officer, a pistol, showing no trace of rust, though it was of an ancient match-lock pattern.

Everything was orderly in the extreme. Bric-à-brac of all kinds was arranged in neat rows upon the tables, each piece standing on its embroidered and beribboned mat. The arm-chairs were placed severely round the walls. At La Bare a 'discriminating disorder' was beginning to obtain, and the furniture was not so strictly arranged. Gaston suddenly had the impression that he was standing

in the room of a peasant—a rich one, perhaps, but a peasant none the less.

He had lunch alone with his uncle. The service, *à la française*, was undertaken by Jeannet, who brought the great silver dishes to the table, presenting the whole joint, and then removed them for carving. No one but Jeannet waited on his master. Gaston had a little valet to himself behind his chair.

When the meal was over, and Uncle Roger was sipping his coffee (but no brandy—what would papa have said!) he pronounced the desired and long-expected phrase:

‘Well, shall we go to the stables?’

They left the house, and Gaston cried out with surprise. Shining golden bronze in the sun stood a light chestnut, a little slighter but with the same strong, graceful lines as the Agramant of the portrait. Jeannet was holding him by a presentation bridle plaited from threads of coloured silk. The horse was bare, in all his alluring splendour, except for a ribbon on his mane and a knot of rose-red ribbon in his tail.

‘This is what I wanted you to see, my boy! Well?’

The child couldn’t get over it.

‘But . . . but . . . what a horse!’

Roger and Jeannet exchanged pleased glances.

‘Was it worth the journey, Gaston?’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it . . . so fine . . . or so strong!’

Already the boy was making friends with the horse. With his intuition, his sure instinct, he found just the tone of voice and the caressing touch which should please the thoroughbred best. He fondled him.

‘You must be very sorry to see him go,’ he said at last, for he had noticed that the tail was dressed as if the horse was for sale.

‘Well, it’s a special occasion,’ said Uncle Roger. ‘He’ll have a good master. You’d like one like him, wouldn’t you?’

'But I couldn't have him,' ejaculated Gaston, in a gay candour; 'he isn't a younger son's horse!'

'We'll see about that, Gaston. Give me twopence. Undo his tail, Jeannet, he's sold.'

'What! You don't mean . . . ? Oh, uncle!'

'Twopence—and he's yours.'

In former times, when you made a present of a horse, the custom was that the recipient should make some payment, however small. The explanation, according to de Maistre, being that if the horse should involve his owner in an accident, the token payment released the donor from all responsibility. He had become the vendor.

Gaston was so overcome that he sat down on the steps. He would have liked to put his arms round his uncle's neck, but the mask and the beard hid so much! He got up to seize his hand, to try and kiss it. But already Tainchebraye had put an affectionate arm around him.

'The horse'll never be between a better pair of legs,' he said. 'We'll go out with him straight away.'

'What's his name?'

'Hum! Well—I had called him "Agramant", but I'd like to make a change. Call him "Arrogant". That sounds pretty much the same.'

'I'm rather sorry . . . because of the association.'

'There's nothing for it, my boy. "Agramant" is no name for a horse of yours. I've already entered him in the Stud Book as "Arrogant", although the old name's still over his box. Come on! We'll go out at four o'clock from the steps here, Jeannet.'

Jeannet understood the meaning glance. The horse had three long leagues in his legs already, but even so he was to be walked up and down. Gaston, whatever his class as a horseman, must be treated with care.

Gaston still felt that he was moving in an enchanted world. The whole stable was waiting for him. Vaguely

he grasped the fact that he was being received with special honour, and with a respect to which he was not accustomed.

'O'Bearn,' said Roger, to an old Irishman who had succeeded Jeannet on the latter's promotion to major-domo, 'this is Monsieur le Vicomte. He'll soon be a better rider than you see in most parts, even in your green isle. You'll see what I mean.'

This title they were giving him embarrassed Gaston: it was like wearing a new coat. He supposed he must accept it. All the horses were brought out, and the boy gave his own brief judgment on each. But for all his experience he was for the moment stupefied in the presence of the coach-horse stallion from which Tainchebraye was trying to breed a new type of cart-horse. The dapple-grey Percheron with its vast body and great shaggy legs was like some huge prehistoric type.

'He weighs 1854 livres,' said Roger.

'Weight tells,' declared Gaston pontifically.

As they were riding up the slope of the drive, with their mounts, Lord Stream and Arrogant, in striking contrast, they came upon the grooms awaiting them on the grass verge, O'Bearn at their head.

'Trot!' commanded Uncle Roger, as if suddenly in charge of a riding-school.

The Irishman forgot his halting French to intone, for the benefit of the triple-waisted coachman, a phrase in the sweet lilting speech of his native Erin.

'Splendid boy! He's a dream riding.'

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Gaston was riding in a dream, too. His uncle had trained the horse with the consummate skill for which he was so justly celebrated. Arrogant's gait had a smooth assurance, strong and rhythmic. The contrast with Gaston's usual type of mount was so great that he seemed

to be wafted along in the cool breeze. He seemed ever ready to increase his speed, so that the slightest encouragement sent him forward like a touch of the spur. An obstacle, not too high, presented itself. Uncle raised his head interrogatively. Gaston's reply was to rise straight at it—and fly over. Another gate now—a terrific jump—and the same curving flight. Houpp! . . . A straining of muscles and a thunder of hoofs muffled by the soft grass. Gaston was drunk with delight. Such a horse would have enchanted him even in a desert. But here! This country was a paradise of green and red, with horizons suddenly opening on to blue-grey vistas. A countryside so different from his own bare plain. Here were bounding hills and unfurled meadows—with water, live water, trickling all around, free at last from its long course through loam and clay; waterfalls, and iris-bordered streams set with great pale arum-lilies. Sheltered from the north wind, the apple-trees were already blossoming in tender pink, while up on the plateau they were still bare. Between sun and water, the grasses sprang up with the richness of hot-house plants. The riders went through and over huge buttercups, and daisies turning to the sun, and giant orchids which broke and foamed beneath the horses' hoofs. Blossom from the trees rained down on them, covering them with petals.

'Uncle! It's too lovely to be true!'

'Wait! You haven't seen anything yet.'

They climbed on, at a fair speed, their horses taut, up a ponderous hill which hid the southern horizon, and when they reached its summit, that pastel-blue line appeared far away below them, and all the world suddenly held a strong, smooth, sweet smell. Gaston cried out in admiration.

In front of them, for almost a quarter of a mile, a wondrous stretch of meadow spread out towards the south, covered, every inch of it, with pale primroses. Two hills enclosed it—padded its sides with emerald green—like a velvet casket holding that precious cloth,

creamy, silken, buttery, where the corollas seemed to be vibrating like eyelashes blinking in the sun. That heavy scent was overpowering. Gaston jumped off his horse and went forward. He had taken off his gloves. He must touch it all. Leading his horse, he bent down. On the warm ground the flowers were curiously cool—as cool as little lips or eyes. He went on till he was surrounded with intense light, hypnotized by a thousand eyes—russet pupils set in clear white. He felt himself illumined from beneath by this stretch of flowers which mirrored the setting sun. His golden horse seemed doubly aureoled, with diamond light from the west, with amber from that rising brightness. Uncle had stopped at the edge of the flood. Immense upon Lord Stream, outlined against the clouds of the north, he might have been a terrifying figure. Yet no!

‘It’s a miracle!’ cried the child.

‘Yes,’ replied Tainchebraye, dismounting too. ‘Let’s rest here for a moment to give the horses a breath.’

Tying their horses to two apple-trees, well apart from each other, the riders sat down on the grass on the edge of the sweet-smelling tide, which, seen thus from low down, seemed to be smoking, giving off a sulphur-yellow steam. Gaston found it strongly compelling, for he leant forward on his wrists, and on all fours stretched out his neck towards the nearest clumps.

Tainchebraye laughed; then:

‘I suppose I count for something too,’ he said, ‘in the miracle. I’ve stopped them mowing this field for four years now.’

The flowers, the strong vibrant patch of light, fled before them, narrowing into a smaller and smaller triangle between the encircling hills. And there before them, at the angle of it, stood a little pilgrims’ chapel, where some women in yellow and blue were waiting. Then came the valley, whose side rose thick with serried ranks of apple-trees. And beyond, the great bluish mass of the hills

swelled up, tier upon tier, growing gradually less vivid in the distance until they reached their crest, an endless, indefinite silver cord hanging from the skies—and nothing but that faint line separated them from the atmosphere.

Numerous white patches, crystallizations of light, appeared in the distance, accompanied by a melody more distinct, which came clearly through the heavy air. Vague, light-coloured forms flitted between the trees, but their song took shape more quickly, and became a slow, measured canticle. At last, close enough to hand, at the bottom of the primrose field, emerged a procession of angelic figures—children, young girls, in immaculate white dresses, bearing a statue of the Virgin. At their head was a tall girl holding up a banner.

‘The Month of Mary,’ murmured Gaston. He stood up bareheaded, and, joining his hands, took up the refrain of the canticle, whose modest rhythm, with the slow swing of a censer, seemed to hold something of the murmur of the very earth:

‘Gentle Mary,
Mother mild,
I am your child, your child. . . .’

Tainchebraye had risen too. Gaston was not aware that his melancholy gaze was upon him. The procession entered the chapel.

‘Would you like to go along with them for a bit?’ said Roger, with an effort.

‘Why, no! I wouldn’t think of leaving you, uncle!’

‘Yes, go on!—and you must tell your dear mother you went. Meet me afterwards at that big farm you can see down there, and we’ll have something to eat. And ask all the children along too, from me. They’re all—or they were once—from the estate. Run along.’

He watched him go—skirting the carpet of flowers on the left—followed him with his eyes into the chapel, whose bell began to ring with a fragile and silvery sound

—the sound a harebell might have given. Then Tainchebraye shrugged his shoulders and went back to the horses.

And now they were returning together to the château at a walking pace. Gaston still moved in an enchanted world. Uncle Roger had announced his coming at the farm—and every one had treated him as if he were precious to them; and the girls in white had fêted him, after a moment's shyness. But Gaston was so used to young peasants that he was soon like a kindly elder brother to them. They gave him flowers. Uncle had sent to the château for fruit-drinks and pastries and, just as in a fairy-tale, a wonderful table of good things awaited them. Songs were sung, and Gaston sang too. Rounds were struck up—and, lo and behold! there appeared a *vielle*-player and a man with an accordion—sent by Monsieur de Tainchebraye, who had known just where to find them. He himself, realizing too well the fear he might inspire, had left his nephew sole master of ceremonies.

They were going back now, at the long, slow walk of the thoroughbreds. Gaston answered questions about the party, and went on talking eagerly, completely expansive, never dreaming that all the while his companion's attitude, his very intonation, was changing. His voice had fallen a little lower, it was a little duller, although the questions still came in the old friendly tone.

And now the child found that he could distinguish much more clearly his real desires in life—desires which until now he had only glimpsed. He revealed himself in all his modesty, his anguish, his uncertainties, his loving instincts, his charity—and all with such an unbounded confidence that even his stutter almost left him. This heavenly day, unique in his life, filled him with ceaseless waves of happiness, a flood of joy bearing him towards some unknown, wondrous, nostalgic shore.

'It's too much. . . . I'm too happy, uncle! Oh—how

much I owe you!' A brief sob shook him. 'I don't think I could bear happiness like this.' Nervous tears came now. 'What can we do, uncle—to keep such happiness?'

Suddenly, as if conscious of some special moment, Lord Stream shot forward violently, at a gallop, and the boy dug his heels in, sniffing back his tears.

'Uncle . . . it's almost a pain, happiness like this, I mean. . . .'

There was no answer. Lord Stream sped on, faster still, as if to escape pursuit, and instinctively Gaston urged on his horse too. Arrogant's long strides lengthened still more, and Lord Stream fled before him. For a second the boy thought it was a game, but simultaneously almost an anguish filled his heart. Arrogant was coming up, and Gaston distinctly saw his uncle's boot steal back and apply the golden spur. He too, for the first time, spurred his mount, and Arrogant leapt madly forward. Gaston might be younger and lighter—but in vain. Lord Stream, by reason of his rider's skill—he sat lightly on him for the slope—was gaining. Then, in the thunder of galloping hoofs, dulled though it was by the deep earth and the soft grass, Gaston's mind reeled, and he was seized by a sudden terrible sense of oblivion, of abandon. . . .

'Help! Uncle. Help!'

The grey-clad horseman strained every muscle. Stream, checked in his course by those athlete's knees and that strong wrist, gathered himself into a ball and stiffened. A trail, black as a ploughed furrow, laid the meadow bare. Stream was moving with such force that he slid forward, fore-legs stretched out: but he came to a stop at last. Gaston pulled up too.

'Uncle!' he called.

And he heard a voice of pain, of regret and of rage too, a voice at once hopeless and full of passion. As if the man crying to him had held in his hands all the sorrow and all the happiness of the world.

'Be a priest, then! That's the only way. Be a priest!'

Had he been on foot, the boy would have sunk to the earth, but he was mounted. He cowered back, and the consciousness of that speed between his knees strengthened the longing of his whole being for flight. And Arrogant, with both spurs in his belly, went off like a bullet, shooting up earth and grass. Gaston dug in his heels again and again, half mad now, and excited by that dull, thudding gallop which pursued him, by that voice cut short in the rush of air—angry no longer, but anxious, tender—a voice that dared not use its full strength for fear of scaring Arrogant:

'Gaston! Stop, little one! Stop!'

But the horse still sped on joyously. Gaston was crouched in a racing position, mouth hanging open, his head bent to help him breathe. To his left fell a huge shadow, gaining ground. . . . Still the boy rode on, straight ahead, for he no longer knew on which foot Arrogant was going and it would be easy to break the magnificent horse's leg. . . . The shadow crept up—and a hand seized the reins. At that mad speed! It was mortal folly! But the man, and his hands, were sure. He was perched forwards, half off his mount on the near side. He did not pull: imperceptibly he was guiding Arrogant to a slope whose steepness would suffice. . . . And the air began to sting less in their faces.

'Stop, Gaston; please stop.'

A broken Gaston gave in and pulled on the reins. He was aware of a slower beat in the rhythm, both of his own life and that life under him. It grew duller, heavier . . . subsided, and was calm. . . . The white-gloved hand left the reins, and suddenly a powerful arm went round his shoulders and Gaston was hugged to the burning body of the masked rider.

'Poor old fellow! Poor little chap. . . .'

The two thoroughbreds, side by side, flung out their

great necks and breathed heavily. At the crest of the hill, against a spreading mass of cloud, there stood silhouetted a strange double group of men and horses, gold and black, in which a masked man hugged to his heart a weeping child.

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CHAPTER XVI

MADemoiselle Aimée

A YEAR later almost to the day, Monsieur de Tainchebraye lay on the point of death. His old friend and doctor Marchal had warned him.

'When you're going upstairs and have to stop for breath at the first landing, then it'll be time to look out!'

He had not yet had to stop there for breath; but one evening, after an hour's battle on the back of a wild young colt, Jeannet saw him stagger a little as he put his foot to the ground.

'Your arm, Jeannet!' he had muttered.

He had refused to sit down until he reached the top of the steps. His breath came heavily and there was a thick sweat on his forehead above the mask. It was not until some minutes had gone by that he spoke again.

'Tell Mademoiselle Aimée,' he said.

He had always been up at five, but next day he had no wish to rise. He asked Jeannet to go and fetch 'Monsieur le Vicomte'.

Gaston came over at full speed. Amélien had shown a desire to accompany him, but Madame de La Bare shook her head.

'He's adopted Gaston. If you're there the child will be your son, and not his. Besides,' she added thoughtfully, 'we mustn't interfere with the divine will.'

Gaston, nowadays, enjoyed a very different position at La Bare. He was treated as a kind of second elder son. And he himself tried to put on a little more worldliness.

The shining May morning—very like that other—

spread everywhere the glory of its eternal resurrection. Gaston urged on Arrogant. The man he loved was going to die. The frequent occasions on which he and Tainchebraye had been alone together had increased all the passionate sympathy that young people of his age so readily feel for a man whom they look up to and who shows affection for them. Gaston rode along the grass verge of the road without seeing or recognizing a soul. Yet it was a Friday, a market day, and the roads were full of countrymen he knew. O'Bearn, who had changed horses at La Bare, was soon outdistanced, but his young master never looked back for him. And when the country-folk saw that speeding horse, they nodded their heads.

'There's bad tidings there!' they murmured.

In the Tainchebraye drive he met Jeannet, riding like a madman. The man hardly slackened speed. 'Hurry up, Monsieur Gaston. . . .' Gaston plunged forward.

When he reached his uncle's room, he knocked and waited. There was no answer. He went quietly in: Monsieur de Tainchebraye was almost sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows, and still masked. At his left, holding his hand, stood a tall young woman in a flounced dress of grey silk. For an instant she lifted her violet eyes towards Gaston—eyes so large that in the midst of his bewildered grief he was surprised. Uncle raised his eyelids; for the first time his nephew had seen them closed, and with the mask the effect had been a dreadful one. The young woman was gently wiping that wide forehead, and Gaston became numbly conscious of her beauty. But already he was on his knees at the side of the bed, kissing that beautiful limp hand—the right hand, which Uncle Roger, with a wan smile, laid slowly on his head.

And then the sick man spoke, with difficulty, for he had to draw breath at each word, but still in a clear voice.

'I'm going . . . quicker . . . quicker than . . . I thought, old fellow.' He smiled again, a slow but ineffable smile.

He clasped the young woman's hand, drawing her a little towards him.

'This is Aimée,' he muttered. 'Aimée. I sent for you . . . to tell you to be good to her, Gaston . . . afterwards.'

He leaned back to rest, and with no doubt an allusion to the boy's naïve question of a year ago, he added:

'It's Aimée . . . for thirty years . . . Aimée who's put the flowers in the house. . . .'

He closed his eyes again.

Gaston glimpsed an abyss: his mind reeled before it. For a long time now, in his purity, he had been conscious of some vague warning, perhaps through scraps of conversation which might go unnoticed at the time but which his mind had none the less stored up, and grave premonitions had been sown in his heart. The feminine presence of which you were aware, everywhere, at Tainchebraye—those tiny details—here was an explanation for them all. In Gaston's room hung the only crucifix in the house, complete with a little altar, peasant style, and each time he had arrived he had found it decorated with flowers in gold-and-white vases. It was she—Aimée! But this sin, the sin of the flesh, which he recognized now, was still for him an obscene monster: something as terrible to the spirit as the Winged Evil behind the Chevalier of Death. An unclean thing, unspeakably foul, bestial. And, even here, it must be admitted. He paled at the images starkly revealed in his mind as in a lightning flash. But then he pulled himself up for a moment. The woman's eyes were closed and long tears flowed from them. Her lovely mouth was parted in an expression which reminded him of the Holy Face.

Gaston tenderly took his uncle's hand again and held it to his breast.

'I am your son, uncle. I'll look after Tainchebraye.'

And he prayed, while, of the two other figures, neither stirred.

He left the room for a few moments to change his clothes and get rid of his noisy boots and spurs. When

he went into his own room—the room kept for him—there were no flowers save at the altar itself, which was freshly adorned.

He went downstairs again quickly, tortured by thoughts of greater importance. He asked the young valet if Monsieur le Comte had received the last sacrament.

‘No,’ came the answer, in astonished bewilderment.

And Gaston entered the dying man’s room once more with a strength of purpose in his distress. He knelt down again. The woman was still standing in exactly the same place, in the same posture.

‘Uncle . . . will you let God come?’

‘That’s not possible, my little one.’

‘Uncle!’

‘No . . . not possible.’

‘Uncle! Do it for me. I should always grieve, living here, if you didn’t. . . .’

‘I knew that. But’—he found the strength to rise an inch or two, gripping the woman’s hand—‘I can’t deny her. . . . I can’t!’ he repeated, with the terrible force of those who are about to die. ‘Deny her! Never!’

Gaston began to tremble. The tall woman, suddenly full of vivid tears, leant forward, kissed, softly, tenderly, that livid brow.

‘Yes,’ she murmured. ‘It must be. I’ve sent Jeannet—a little while ago.’

Gaston was riding Arrogant back to La Bare. The funeral cortège of the man they had known as the ‘gentleman of love’ was followed by very few of the local châtelains. For they still bore him rancour because he had scorned them. But close on two thousand of the peasants followed him, and at the church there were others waiting—those who had not been able to join the funeral procession in time. And among them there were men whom towns and townsmen never see; from the forests, the woods, the quarries, the mines and the marl-pits they came, hearts grieving; men who still, in the folds of their

eyelids and in the corners of their lips, bore traces of coal-dust; quarry-men pitted by flying chips of stone; woodmen who, wandering with their axes from forest to forest for three years at a time, could no longer remember where they had left their Sunday clothes—denizens of the forests, who would smoke the leaves of the chestnut-tree rather than go down into the villages. . . . In some mysterious fashion they had learned of the death, and they were here in time. 'There was such a rattle of sabots,' writes the Abbé Lenoir, curé of Chamblac, 'on the roads that night, that those who by chance had not heard the news could only think that war had broken out.' And for the last time a custom was observed which is now extinct: the men all threw a flint into the tomb, the subterranean, smoky stone of fire from which the spark is born; the stone that was once used to fire powder and which, in still more ancient times, had been the only weapon of war—that artificial tooth and claw with which the primeval men armed their fists.

With Roger de Tainchebraye died, finally, the *ancien régime*, the time of love and honour, the true democracy which did not force the souls of its leaders to bow down to the desires of the mass, but which leavened that mass by the poetry and the nobility in the lives of its chiefs.

Gaston, the heir, followed alone and close behind the coffin; then came Jeannet, carrying upon a cushion six decorations, the Cross of Saint Louis being the chief; then Lord Stream, his horse, saddled and bridled, with ribbons of crape at his head and a great dalmatic over the white saddle; the servants and the farmers came next, and last of all—after the domain and the household—the family. And behind, the road was blackened by that interminable procession, which by reason of the steepness of the slope spread out longer still.

Gaston spent more than an hour shaking hands.

His uncle had been confessed, and when he was receiving the extreme unction, in the presence of all the

servants and the villagers, Gaston, turning round, had caught sight of Aimée, pressed into the farthest corner of the other room. With a sad, delirious elation Gaston conquered a scruple which suddenly seemed unworthy; he went to her and led her to the foot of the bed, placing her on his right.

Tainchebraye had struggled on until the Saturday morning, and at the hour when the dying are still at last, he died in their arms as dawn came. Broad rays of sunlight barred his hidden face with gold. They buried him without touching the mask.

The window stood open but the blinds were drawn. Gaston was standing there in prayer: two old women were telling their beads by the bed, when a step was heard creaking on the gravel outside. Aimée, her head held low, was leaving, with a little bag in her hands. Gaston ran after her.

‘Aimée! Please stay—I beg of you——’

He was strangling that scruple, that insistent scruple.

‘No,’ she said slowly, shaking her curls, ‘I have a little house that he gave me—down there—on the edge of the forest.’ Her hand pointed vaguely into the distance.

‘You must stay here, Aimée. I shan’t be here for long at a time. I’ll come over every week. The house needs you. Please, Aimée.’

‘But your parents . . .’

‘My father knows his duties’ (the memory of Madame Lieurre pierced him like an arrow), ‘and my mother, too, like me. . . . Ah, how grateful we should be to you!’

‘I’ll do as you wish,’ she said at length, her head still low. And she came in again.

So Gaston returned to La Bare, a day after the others. He felt that he needed to be once more in his own country, his normal habitat; he needed once more that old calm, that comparative serenity, which he recalled nowadays with so much regret.

He must find his childhood once more. At sixteen he was weighed down by the burden of being a man.

His mother had started a little when, quite formally and gently, he had announced his intention of keeping the young woman at Tainchebraye.

‘But . . . you don’t know——’ she began.

‘I do,’ he interpolated sadly, closing his eyes. ‘But it’s to her that we owe . . .’ and he explained that last renunciation. ‘I’m sure,’ he concluded, ‘that papa will approve.’ He turned towards his father.

He could not see his expression, for Amélien’s face was lowered as if in anger. But he heard him mutter an oath.

Then, suddenly, raising his head, he roared:

‘It’s a worthless heir who’ll chase away the dog!’

CHAPTER XVII

THE MADWOMAN

How did it come about that Gaston had suddenly ceased to feel horror in the presence of sin and of those who sinned—if the sin were incarnate in such a being as Aimée? Was it because there was something of greatness in her? Yes, doubtless. But he felt vaguely that the woman's white beauty, too, the tragic grace of those violet eyes, of that little curved mouth, counted for something—her 'sweet savagery', the Marquis called it. He felt that he was being weak. Such little earthly things could then hide the fault for him: could blind him to eternity! Had he forgotten the Christ of the oratory? Was he being won over to the other side?

He was well aware of the fact that he could be stirred by the beauty of young women. He remembered once more the girl who had carried the banner a year ago; he saw her again in the proud flowering of her loveliness, the blue and the rose and the gold of her colouring, and the white dress that heightened the attraction of her body and her tall strength. How deeply her gentle air had touched him. He had seen her sometimes in his dreams, when she brought such a feeling of contentment. But he understood too that his feeling for her was but a part of his gratitude for all the beauty of the world—that wonderful gift. That love had in it something of the divine: but this . . .

He looked round at the countryside and saw it as if with newly awakened eyes. Everything suggested indulgence, complicity even, in sin. The Ouche country is especially rich in pear-trees; they grow to a great size and are often used to shelter the more delicate apple-trees.

And now, behind those tall white forms, where not a single green leaf could be seen, the eager little apple-trees were shyly putting forth their rosy blooms: a gay marriage. The leafy trees seemed to be holding out their arms . . . the earth, half opened by the plough, seemed strained and parched with waiting, thirsting beneath the sun. Every furrow was a mouth. . . .

The child in Gaston did not know that it was through too long a contact with death that he was throwing himself the more ardently into the luxury of life.

He was touched when on the final stage of his journey he saw another rider—Federspiel—coming to meet him. The La Bare horses had been resting since the previous day, but the tutor had nevertheless pushed on as far as possible on a sorry farm nag. The German greeted him with a melancholy respect for his silence.

'In him, the last *grand seigneur* has gone!' That was all he said.

And he started the journey back, by the side of Arrogant in all his steely gold—he who could be so jealous of a good horse, riding his miserable weak-kneed jade.

How deeply Gaston was loved! The whole household was silent with sympathy for his grief and for the weariness that burned feverishly in his cheeks. After dinner he went up very quickly to his little room on the second floor. Ferline was still there, tidying his things, and now he was particularly conscious of her beauty. That other woman must be getting on for forty, the Marquis had said. It was the pagan suppleness of her body that kept her young. But Ferline, with her curls brighter than even Arrogant's gold, and her rose-marble complexion—her face so tiny for that tall body—Ferline seemed perpetually to be offering something . . . something sweet and terrible, as the reward of victory. . . . But already he heard himself asking:

'How is your mother, Ferline?'

'Oh!' She stopped her work suddenly. 'She's very excited. I didn't say a word to her about Monsieur le Comte's death, but she must have overheard the gardeners talking as she sat at the window, and guessed at it that way. And now she won't stop talking—it's just like her bad days.'

And indeed, in the silence that followed, Gaston could hear through the half-opened door Madame Lieurre's strange, high-pitched, monotonous reiterations.

In lassitude he shrugged his shoulders but otherwise did not move.

'Monsieur Gaston—I wanted to tell you——'

Ferline clasped her hands as she looked at him with such pity in her gaze.

'Thank you, Ferline—yes, it's been a great sorrow.' He gave her his hand. And she put her own into it. He felt all her small fingers nestling in his palm. Like an automaton, he considered them, admired them. Nothing had spoiled their texture or their shape, for the young woman never touched anything but the linen. Then his eyes found her face again—it was half averted, and he only saw her profile, clouded by curls.

'Thank you—*ma belle Ferline!*'

Across the sky the twilight trailed its splendour of green and gold. Gaston sat down between the two curved panelled cupboards which enclosed the little window and its window-seat. He let his glance rest on the noble landscape. The lake lay like a tear-drop among the massed trees of the park, its surface quivering like some fine skin with flies and rising fish. The horizon was level here. Over there, towards Perche, the hills would be looming up like catafalques. . . .

He must have dozed off to sleep. A scratching at the door brought him back to himself.

'Come in,' he said mechanically, thinking that they were bringing something he had forgotten. The door moved and gently shut again. Hearing nothing more,

he looked round; who was he expecting that he should feel this pang of disappointment? Standing motionless against the door, her white hair touching the lintel, was Madame Lieurre. The last reflections from the western sky, entering by the window, threw her into tragic relief. She was wearing her great red-and-black cloak, and on either side hung white plaits—her famous hair was arranged for the night. As she faced the window not a single shadow fell upon her features, which appeared strangely immaterial. Gaston was not afraid; he was not even astonished. He was too well acquainted with her mania for wandering about and her harmless madness.

‘My friend,’ he began, ‘you mustn’t . . . I’ll take you back. . . .’

‘No need. I know my way about La Bare—who better? Aye, and the secret rooms, too.’ She raised her head proudly. ‘But oh! Monsieur Gaston, let me have just a minute—just a minute!’

She seemed to have regained all her reason for a while. The head, which scarcely ever ceased from its restless movement from side to side, was still now.

‘Well,’ she went on, ‘is it true that he’s dead? Roger de Tainchebraye dead. Quiet at last! Dead in his bed. Ah! I’d like to know how he died. . . .’

‘He died in the peace of the Lord—reconciled——’

‘Reconciled! Him, too? Forgiven! Gaston de La Bare died at peace too. . . .’ (The young man started painfully—his own name! But she was referring to his great-uncle.) ‘Yes, they all die in peace—and we—we that they loved, we can wring our hands. Roger loved me. Then he said to Gaston, “I’m tired of her, I’m passing her on to you—she’s worth it!” Yes. And I was all obedience. Gaston now—he was gentle. T’other one was wild. . . .’

‘Madame Lieurre! Think what you’re saying! I don’t want to hear. I’ll take you back to your room. I’ll call Ferline.’

‘Ferline?’ She laughed a bitter laugh. ‘She’s just

the same—a real chip of the old block! No, just a moment, Gaston, then I'll say no more.'

'They've been pardoned, Madame Lieurre; they've suffered too. Pardon them in your turn.'

The old woman relapsed into that thin, toneless, parrot-voice once more.

'... We forgave them a long time ago. You couldn't hold it against them, the noble lords. God's done the same as us, that's all. No, Gaston—just one minute more. Tell me about Aimée, Aimée-Desirée. . . .'

'It was Aimée who sent for the priest,' said Gaston heavily. He was somewhat at his wits' end by now.

'She kept him thirty years. The beast, the savage beast! The murderer's daughter! No, Gaston, listen—it's you who'll reign at Tainchebraye now?'

'Come. . . .'

'Listen. My heart's there, Gaston—with all the hearts he tore from their warm, beating breasts—those lost, pale, trembling breasts. The château of Tainchebraye is full of hearts. You've heard them. You've asked yourself, I know, when you were awake at night, what could be that dull beating, resounding through the whole house. And while he lay at death's door, you heard them beat, beat, beat. The whole château was trembling under those dull thuds, and it got louder as his own grew faint. And now you'll give me back my heart, so that I can die.'

'Leave me! Don't touch me! Go away——'

But she sidled confidentially up to him.

'And then, after that, my boy, after that, you won't stay at Tainchebraye. It won't do you any good. The very walls sweat out love, its passions and its last sighs. You've got some of his blood—that masked man's blood—and his flesh—and it'll stifle you!

'Ah! La Bare, La Bare!

Blood on the boots and fire in the loins!'

Swaying her head, she psalmodized; and bending over

the young man, who was stiff with horror, gripped him by the wrist and went on:

'Amélien, Gaston, Jean—all for the girls all the time. "Let me hug you and keep you! Don't cry; I love you, little girl! I love your freshness and your sweet, frank air. . . ." Oh! everybody's girl and nobody's girl. "Slip off your dress for me, for I'm going to die to-morrow—I'll be killed to-morrow, at the wars, in a duel, or hunting. Love me, fair rosy flesh, before I die, and my life shall quicken your lovely flesh! And you shall give birth to dukes. . . ."

She seized his other wrist, and, holding him thus, she screamed into his face:

'All your family, do you hear me, Gaston de La Bare, all your family has rushed down on us! And when we got married, for we had to, afterwards, we'd tell our husbands, "Hands off the first-born, for he's got blue blood in his veins, but you can leather the others if you're drunk".'

She stopped—gathering her breath with a kind of whinny.

'Ah!—my little heir of Roger de Tainchebraye—Roger of Love—he's chosen your veins and your hands and your heart. . . .'

Suddenly stirred to action, Gaston threw himself upon her and put his hand over her mouth. He opened the door to thrust her out. But suddenly the fury in her died and she collapsed into silent tears.

'My Roger, my dead Roger . . . with his little hands . . . his tiny hands.'

Gaston went back into his room. His race had given freely of itself in fornication and war, and now all that heritage flamed before him, burning his eyeballs like a fire which should lay waste the world. Flames and cries sprang up. And a moaning, too, infinitely quiet, the pleading of the victims of love, the happy victims, praying that they might be spared for the mere sensual

joy of pleading and being wooed again. A Witches' Sabbath spreading across the ages, conquering all history, century by century, back through the ranks of his ancestors, whom he had thought so holy and devout. A burning pile of sinful folly. And he himself figured in their place. . . . Gaston seemed to himself to slide back into the past, transformed now by a suit of armour, now by a necklet of steel; he recognized himself in the Leaguer with the white cross, in the Crusader with the hauberk, rushing into battle, rushing upon women's warm caresses, to kisses and to wounds. That was what his race had been—that was what they hid from him, that was the burden they bore—the crushing weight of God's stern justice; beasts, taken between their slaughter and their copulation. Forgotten now were the sacrifices they had made, their self-denial, their undying fidelity. He mistrusted their high deeds. He saw only those that were base. 'Millers of tears!' And in speechless horror he grew aware that their blood beat in his veins too: he, too, was predestined to that madness. For a second he hovered on the brink of death, at the high window which lay open to the night. He had undressed, automatically, as if in an act of purification, and stood naked now, his teeth chattering, in an emotion which was yet not wholly horror. Feeling this, he threw himself on his knees, his head almost buried in the sheets of his bed, in the hope that prayer would come. But still around him he was aware of that dull, murmuring roar. The little room was charged with the spirits of evil. And in the grip of a childish terror he waited for black, implacable hands to seize him by the shoulders and force him round, face to face with some terrible leering grin. . . . Oh, for some shield! If only he had been able to run to the feet of Christ there in the oratory; the blood that flowed there would have wiped away the anguish and the evil. That pure lily-like presence! All at once he thought of the chapel, of the lamp that one could see through the narrow window at the end of the corridor,

shining across the garden. The thought of it was like a draught of hope. Hastily he threw a cloak round him and ran barefoot across the cold stone into the darkness—hurtling against everything as he ran with the violence of an imprisoned bird, groping his way to the window, and at last he saw it. . . .

Silence lay around him now. Nothing stood out clear in the night but that feeble star, low among the trees. Everything that was pious and pure shone in that star, promising ineffable aid. Kneeling at the window, he looked long at the light, scarcely blinking, praying easily now, letting his own self be absorbed by that loving kindness. Word by word, his voice lingered on those precious syllables, so that, one by one, they should bring him their strength and their solace, so that they should quench for ever that torment of fire, the hot breath from hell: and the hope of peace began to reassure his soul.

Owls flew by silkily. The house creaked, as if at night it relaxed, resting from the weight of human beings. The lamp in the sanctuary seemed to be growing larger, it seemed to rise, to come to life, with a sort of rhythmic pulsation, bringing with it, in great waves, resolution and strength and certainty. . . .

A creak, louder than the rest. He turned round. No one could see him as he knelt in the embrasure of the window. Someone had come out of a room. . . . Ferline's room! Someone? Ah, yes! In the shadowy dimness of the corridor . . . that fair head . . . those broad shoulders . . . that figure making his way so cautiously down to the first floor, to the family apartments. . . .

And now Gaston was stumbling into the night; clawing his way along the walls, the chalk whitening his fingers, his nails, he staggered back. . . . That dull

murmur rose again, catching up his whole soul once more into its soaring whirlwind. The cries of women, of warriors, and of children—the implacable tumult, louder now, in which those voices were adjuring him, inviting him, warning him, calling him—and one voice, scarcely dead, dominating all in its rage and despair:

‘BE A PRIEST! THAT’S THE ONLY WAY. BE A PRIEST!’

PART III

'And I gave him a grain of corn. . . .'

CHAPTER XVIII

SHADOWS OVER THE COUNTRYSIDE

THIS poor barren land of Ouche was, curiously enough, one of the most aristocratic soils in France. No province could muster such a list of illustrious names. In fact, within a boundary of twenty leagues by ten there were no less than six ducal families, while Brittany could boast of the Rohan-Chabots alone.

There were the Laval-Montmorencys, at Beaumesnil; the Broglies in the former Chambrais, renamed after them in 1742; the elder line of the princes Rohan-Rohan, at Beaumont; the Caumont la Force, at Chandai; the Clermont-Tonnerres at Glisolles; the Rohan-Chabots (Jarnac), at Condé. And as if this galaxy of peers were not enough, around them clustered astonishing numbers of the most ancient Norman names, and barons and knights of ancient title. The region took its character from them, and the people themselves were ennobled; and if the land is still what it is to-day, with its intelligence and its courtesy, the fact must be attributed to the presence of these nobles and the little courts which were held there; even to the valets, whom the villagers respected—and one must bear in mind the size of the retinues that these great houses could keep up.

The dukes had no admiration for a life of prodigal ease, and the country people were influenced by their example. They might have been still living under Louis Philippe, for the importance they attached to the bour-

geois virtues as a solid foundation for their power. They set the example of industry and simplicity, occupying themselves with science, with letters, and with provincial matters.

Perhaps they were weary enough of Paris, and glad to renounce the fashionable life of the capital. The dukes of Broglie went about the roads on foot. The Duke of Clermont-Tonnerre was so fond of fishing that he would almost go to the trouble of disguising himself to fish incognito and undisturbed. For five years on end he was able to haunt a little inn on the outskirts of Conches, fly-fishing his way up to it along the banks of the Rouloir. All of them retained their gaiety and their wit. As she poured out his drink one morning, the landlady said to the last-named:

'It's funny, you know, but you look just like the Duc de Clermont!'

'It's not so odd,' he replied, with a wink, 'there's some say it's likely enough we had the same father!'

They kept to the somewhat drawling pronunciation of the eighteenth century. The old Comte de Masitre would imitate this drawl, in telling you how his uncle, the Duke of Laval-Montmorency, when expressing his disdain for Louis Philippe, had said: 'You can't possibly consecrate at Rheims a rapsallion who came out of a box.' He was referring to the ballot-box to which the Duke of Orleans owed his throne. The peasant instinctively respects and trusts the seigneur from his own part of the world, who speaks exactly like him, and does not resort to that brittle, dental language which is becoming that of the fashionable world to-day. The old French speech is dull and soft, upon the lower range of the musical scale; the new French is nervous and higher pitched, demanding greater efforts from the lips.

Each great family had its own 'history', rooted in legends which the people never grow tired of relating to one another.

But let this be clearly understood: these illustrious

families, socially so active, were less praiseworthy in their religious life. They gave no impression of deep personal devotion, their worship sprang from no inner conviction. In this, too, the 'grands seigneurs' remained very eighteenth century, conforming rather than 'believing'. 'I've been at N—— for thirty-five years,' an old canon used to say, 'and I've never yet known the Duke take communion.' And if they frowned upon licentiousness, they did not, on the other hand, encourage the exaltation of the soul, nor its immission in God. For them, true priesthood did not begin till episcopacy was reached.

In their eyes the rank of abbé was an uncertain one—at best a waiting period, a position good enough for natural sons and peasants who showed a disposition for learning. All the parish priests came from this class; they adjudged them useful, but it would never have occurred to them to consider them worthy of sympathy or to accept them as their spiritual leaders. Their formula, 'He's a worthy priest, an excellent priest,' expressed their indifference *for the man himself, the man of renounced passions, of saintly deeds or aspirations.*

The prelates themselves were not exempt from this attitude of easy disdain. 'When we dress up some brave fellow in black,' remarked Monseigneur N——, Bishop of Évreux, 'we do nothing to prevent God making him into a good priest: it's less difficult than educating him.'

It is safe to conclude that in reality the great seigneurs tolerated with difficulty any excess of religious zeal. Manfred's attitude, even more than his father's, was a reflection of theirs. For Amélien's nature had something in common with the bluff heartiness of the Crusader: 'It's like that, is it? Good—come on then—march!' and he would have marched even to Palestine. Manfred, like the Dukes, might think: 'We may as well go, since we must,' with which observation he would go as far as his parish church, but no farther.

Thus the priests, and all the officiating clergy, felt that they received no real help in their struggle to attain to that

true apostleship—the only one that counts—in which the whole being is caught up in enthusiasm. They had no confidence in themselves: and thus it came about that this little region of Ouche, almost incomparable for its aristocratic tone, its love of tradition and its manners, was fortified by no such Christian fervour as one might have expected from its human qualities.

Federspiel, who was German and a metaphysician, assured us, in the curious notes he left behind, that this strange lack of religious inspiration could be attributed to very different causes. He would not have been a true Teuton if he had not tried to arrange his arguments into a coherent and complete thesis.

‘The survival of diabolism,’ was his verdict.

The Marquis would listen attentively to him over his glass of brandy; the melancholy tutor could play upon chords of his being which were carefully concealed, but yet lay dormant in his complex heart—that heart filled with the echoes of a thousand years. Manfred would smile, with a slight but not deprecatory shrug of his shoulders. ‘Bravo, Monsieur Federspiel—most ingenious!’ Madame de La Bare did not wish to be involved in such complicated matters. She had expressed her attitude once and for all.

‘My dear friend, you are meddling in the ways of hell. You mustn’t expect me to be interested.’

‘Matame,’ came the answer—and that incongruous ‘t’ was the only remaining evidence of the tutor’s foreign origin, ‘Matame la Marquise, I am a better Christian than you, because I believe in a real snorting Devil.’

‘Oh,’ replied Madame de La Bare. ‘It would be better to believe in a suffering Christ.’

‘One cannot reveal God, Matame, for He is infinite; we cannot attain to God by definition. But the Devil is a finite being, and therefore concrete; and to give him a tangible form, to make him visible, audible, even intelligible—that’s the only proof of the supernatural that poor

mankind can hope for—the only proof of a supernatural existence. . . .’

And Federspiel, with his curious, analytical spirit, would explain also the peculiarities of the countryside around La Bare. ‘An ancient forest, evidence of whose extent can be seen in the thickets which remain even to-day in the centre of every field of any size. They seem an avowal of man’s fatigue and discouragement. Perhaps they are a sacrifice to the old woodland divinities—a last refuge left for them. This forest must have been immense; it can be reconstructed from Écouves to Saint-Evrault. The Ouche forest was the Broceliande of the north-west.

‘Then, when Neustria became ducal Normandy, a land under authority, a land of peace, the roughest warriors refused to turn mere cultivators of the land, or to bind themselves to the soil. They took refuge in the forests, so impenetrable that the twin powers of king and duke could not reach them. These outlaws lived the lives of free men, and preserved all their practices, all their superstitions, their ancient northern cults.’

The tutor would now brandish in triumph one or two strange amulets.

‘How else do you explain the veneration of amber, of which they made necklaces for their children, and talismans which were the more effective the bigger and rougher they were? The Phœnicians had revealed to the Baltic races the value of this fossil matter they came so far to seek. There are a number of your old customs which have come down from them—from Egypt or Syria. It was the forest people who kept them alive. The respect shown to cats—not one of your men will shoot a cat, they’ll only “lose” them. And that worship of the goat, the Theban godhead—why, your farmers always keep a goat in any stable of importance. Yes, I know they tell you that the smell of them keeps snakes away—but though they don’t know it, they’re only renewing an old affinity, putting Ammon with Isis—the cow and the ram.’

And the German would tell how the early church had continuously denounced these refractory men and their unholy forest. The patron saints of the diocese were the martyrs of Ouche—like Saint Taurus who won his martyr's crown there, beaten to death for having tried to penetrate into that fastness of trees.

But since they could never conquer this country for Christianity, they 'reserved' it, entrusting the pagan forests to the religious authorities, whose jurisdiction was purely ecclesiastical and contained no political element. It was a region apart, like the rebellious, unpacified sections of a conquered country which are left under military rule while the rest can be handed over to the colonial administration. The church divided it into religious fiefs, crammed it with abbeys, carved it up into priories and chapels: the abbeys of Ouche or of Saint-Evrault, of Lyre, of la Chaise-Dieu, of Beaumont, of la Noë—such a close network of them that one can cross the whole district without stepping outside the precincts of these monastic forts, these sacred block-houses.

'And it was a success, after a thousand years of struggle and combat, when the revolution came, bringing ruin to this pious military system. Christianity was shaken off and the old paganism sprang up again at once, like a flame. Moreover,' Federspiel would go on, 'the monks themselves, with an excess of good intentions, had helped to increase the danger. They treated mad people—"the possessed"—at Saint-Evrault, plunging them into the ice-cold spring there, so far-famed that afflicted souls rushed to it from far and wide. They left a trail of sulphur behind them: and the great majority—those who were not cured at once—stayed on at Saint-Evrault. The country became tainted. The Devil was everywhere.'

This the La Bares did not deny; they were well aware of the power exercised by the sorcerers. (Gaston ex-

cepted, they had no scruples about consulting them on occasion.) But they took all this for granted. . . . The tutor, a newcomer, fell on this strange evidence of the occult with a fresh avidity, a fresh perspicacity. He hunted the devil, in addition to his other cynigetical pursuits. Some of his papers are notable for an indubitably scientific approach to the subject; his researches were quite uncoloured by enthusiasm or anterior conviction. One cannot deny their documentary value without vaunting a spirit of scepticism no less unscientific, in this case, than credulity would be.

Something abnormal was at work here, something that the priests call 'supra-natural', thus discriminating between this type of manifestation and the 'supernatural', the divine.

A certain diary has been preserved in which a matter-of-fact woman had described day by day the troubles which disturbed her home. This diary remains the more striking in that it is purely objective, as we should say to-day: it shows no desire to dramatize the events recorded, or to explain them. Moreover, she shows no sign of fear when being confronted with these terrifying phenomena. One can see, as one reads, the strong, severe Norman woman, a realist whose gaze is so direct as to be uncomfortably penetrative. She was a member of the small property-owning class.

The house in which she and her husband lived was almost sacked—nothing less! The crockery left the shelves of its own accord, and in front of their very eyes, to crash in the middle of the room. A mortar weighing forty pounds jumped into the air from the ground and fell down again, cracking the brickwork of the floor. One can still see the mark. The inhabitants of the little house were not alarmed: they would call out most gaily to the invisible spirit.

'Tuesday, 7th.—Incessant meddling all day long. 36 manifestations. Breakages: three basins, a mortar, two funnels. A stone was thrown on to the ground. Mr. X.

(her husband) picked it up, with the remark, "Well, you can play with it if you want to!" (Sic!) Then he went into the (. . .). Immediately, the stone was thrown with terrific violence against the door of the (. . .).

'Friday, 20th.—Monsieur le Curé de Saint E . . . blessed the house about five o'clock. Two minutes later a glass jar smashed itself against the door of the room in which every one had gathered. Other things went on breaking till half-past nine.'

At length, the writer becomes a little less detached.

'Thursday, 16th.—An awful day. . . . 17 occurrences, some of them quite violent. It's terrible.'

Federspiel wanted to know the whys and wherefores of all this, and he resolved to pass the night in a house which was said to be haunted and whose two inhabitants were growing thin with fright. Gaston, learning of his intention, begged him not to go. Then, since the tutor would not be dissuaded, the young man expressed the wish to accompany him. The tutor refused, and at last seemed to abandon his idea; but, the manifestations having broken out again, he went in secret.

On the previous night the two inhabitants of the little house had been obliged to leave their bed: their night-shirts were burning away on their bodies! A more grotesque picture could not be imagined! These peasants, forced to strip themselves naked to quench the burning tails of their ample night attire which were flaming away like tinder! One could not invent an occurrence like that. Those who fabricate such stories aim at the fearful, the dramatic. A tale like this would only raise a laugh.

And in this house the cold, scientific Federspiel passed a night which he confessed was full of terror. The inexplicable uproar, the unseen movements, would have been too much for the bravest of men.

He explained afterwards that the house was surrounded by a sort of tempest, a rushing, howling wind, but that when he looked out of the window, to his unspeakable

surprise, the twigs and branches of the trees were absolutely motionless in the still night; not the slightest breath of wind was stirring. He opened the window: the air was warm and humid—tepid, as before a storm, and stagnant. He went back to bed, surrounded by that seething nothingness, and from time to time came another, rattling, sound 'like the creaking of cart wheels or a shower of pebbles'. Then a hiatus—a silence more threatening still; and suddenly the door was shaken by the most inconceivable of scraping sounds—as if a bear's claws were tearing it down from top to bottom. Federspiel was no cowardly spirit; he got up, sword-stick in hand—he had brought no other weapon; he tried to open the door, but it was held firmly against the frame by another hand, even stronger than his. He could not even manage to shake its free edge. He returned to fetch his lamp, to investigate—to make sure that the bolt had not been pushed home. Yet the lamp revealed to him no such obstacle. He tried again to open it—in vain. At a third attempt, the door opened so easily that he nearly fell backwards and was thrown against the opposite wall. The sudden rush of air put out the lamp. After this, not wanting to give way to fear, he left the door open and sat across the threshold, waiting, sword in hand. . . .

This experience he related to Manfred and Gaston. Manfred was deeply interested but untouched by the slightest shadow of terror. 'I don't think I've ever known fear,' he declared.

'You're lucky,' came Gaston's rather cold reply.

Gaston had now changed so much that every one accepted his new seriousness of manner and was no longer astonished by it. Two years ago, a child still, he would have shuddered, dully repeating the dreadful details with trembling lips. To-day, he only asked:

'Did you pray?'

'Not then,' replied Federspiel. 'The act of prayer would have been tantamount to an admission that I must abandon all hope of grappling with the problem by

human means. I sat listening to the rolling waves of that invisible torrent: there was something inexorable in its regularity, as if it had been a great flowing river. Then it fell silent once more. I admit that at that moment, in spite of my resistance, I became aware of a feeling which almost amounted to a cowardly fear. I longed, desperately, for a light. But I hadn't the strength to get up and strike a light with the sulphur matches I had brought along. I felt something coming. And this—I've thought it over a dozen times—this is the best way I can describe the sensation I next felt: I was conscious of some enormous reality in the room, an overbearing reality, growing vaster and vaster in the darkness . . . the great mass of it even deepened the darkness around me. A blackness was being diffused, and a rising pressure. This pressure caught me, bound me, paralysed me—it must even have pressed back the walls and swelled out the ceiling in its force. In the end, I think, I managed to stand up, but I seemed to be wrapped in lead and couldn't take a step forward. . . . I had on this waistcoat I'm wearing now—I'd taken off my coat so as to be able to move more freely. You see how close together these buttons are? Well, they were clicking one against the other, several times, and burning into my chest—some invisible hand of fire might have been trying to get at my throat. At that instant—yes, then, I prayed, and I felt as it were unconsciously that the pressure was growing less—the buttons were quiet again. I couldn't exactly tell how long all this took, since my watch had stopped. Yet this—this sensation of being crushed, must have lasted for a very considerable time, for it was three in the morning before I felt free again. I lit my matches and went downstairs. I found the two peasants praying, on their knees—with sheets over their heads so that they should hear and see nothing. All three of us then left the house.'

A silence followed Federspiel's account. Then Gaston, in seeming indifference, expressed an opinion:

'Do let me say once more, monsieur, that you're wrong to try and grapple with these questions. You've been warned: the Church doesn't approve of this sort of research work. Our uncle, the Cardinal, forbade it in his diocese—from the day when a table that "turned" broke when a crucifix was put on it. . . .'

But Manfred had heard this anecdote before. He turned to Federspiel.

'What happened then, monsieur?' he asked eagerly. 'It's a bewildering story.'

'Well, the priest had failed, so the great exorciser of France was sent for—Father de Hatza, a Jesuit—the tutor's mood, which during the first part of his story had been one of emotional stress, became light and amused—a man of very good German family, connected with the Reuss's and the Radziwills. And he spoiled everything! The affair finished like a regular conjuring trick. He invited the Devil. . . . Yes, that's what he called him—to strike twelve blows on the hearth, if it was he. Well, we heard *eleven* hammer blows—loud enough to break the whole fireplace, but only eleven! The Jesuit was angry. "You're mocking us," he cried, "begin again!" The eleven blows rang out once more—and one tiny sound, the merest clink, for the twelfth. Then there came a sort of tearful murmur—scarcely audible through the prayers the priest was intoning. And that was all! Federspiel cried angrily. 'The people went back to their house again and now they can sleep in peace. What a tale of tragic imbecility! What a wasteful expense of idiotic resourcefulness! And all for nothing—to give in without a struggle! No, wait—there was one thing more. A peculiarly sudden gust of wind and snow, blowing with great force, almost upset the Jesuit's carriage on his way there. "No doubt this is where I must alight," he remarked . . . it happened just outside the house.'

'If it was the Devil, his tactics are most foolish. All the fear he evokes drives people directly to prayer and to

God. And this sort of thing is always grotesque. I myself felt the presence of something that inspired me with awe, but in the ordinary way such manifestations are on the same plane as the pranks of drunken peasants—shirt-tails burning, hats flying off, and that sort of thing. If the Devil really wants to corrupt us, why doesn't he tempt us in some beautiful and alluring guise. In the time of Saint Anthony of Thebes, he seems to have been intelligent enough!

'Yes. He should tempt us with charm, with beauty,' said Gaston, his voice like a melancholy echo. 'We shall never know what permission has been given him.'

From Federspiel's observatory at the top of the house, his feverish hand on the cool surface of that fine telescope with its royal arms, Gaston looked out over his sad countryside as it sloped towards Saint-Evrault. The succession of woods and thickets would soon become part of the great forest again. Every field glistening between the sombre trees, on this plain that lay dark under the south wind, had been the work of the monks, cleared to the sound of psalms and hallelujahs to keep the demons back in the forest. To-day, like the thorns and brambles creeping out from the edge of a wood, the advance of diabolism was devouring the countryside, covering, inch by inch, the spaces which had been cleared by faith: what the sky sees, it blesses. What sacrifice was necessary, then, to stem this invasion? What victim must be chosen? One who should represent in himself the history of this land, one taken from its deepest roots, from its oldest stock, one who was part of its glory and its sin. . . . For that evil was seeping into every league of it. The Church was suffering; vespers echoed hollow in the emptier churches against the mighty derision of the wind. And the sorcerers' magic had regained its old prestige. Satan was advancing, preceded by his grim buffoons.

CHAPTER XIX

WAITING

GASTON had scarcely any friends. He did not hunt, and when his father expressed his intense displeasure at this, the young man had answered him once and for all: 'I can't bring myself to kill anything whatsoever.' The last victim of any murderous act of his had been a frog. When he had hoisted it into the air on the hook which had caught its skin, the little beast uttered such a cry of agony and suffering and despair that Gaston was utterly taken aback. And before that, he had stopped his ears to keep out the terrible strident cries of a doe-hare which Manfred was finishing.

He rode alone. His horsemanship and the quality of his mount necessarily set him rather apart. Manfred, always out of doors, could indeed have been his companion; but the younger brother seemed to have little inclination for his company now. Madame de La Bare had it that the death of his uncle had been too great a shock and had 'forced his nature'.

Perhaps Gaston entertained a more brotherly feeling for the little peasant boys, his playmates of yesterday; but they were at work on the land now, and with the passage of time the difference between their worlds was accentuated.

Then again, the La Bares were almost the only family who did not spend the winter in Paris, and thus they found themselves somewhat exiled. Their nearest neighbours who, like themselves, stayed here all the year round, seemed to add an even stranger note to the character of the region. The owners of Forêt-Claire seemed quite normal and of excellent health. No consanguinity could

be attributed to them which might explain the tragedy which had befallen them—so courteous, almost effacing themselves by the politeness of their manners, they were destined to a life of tragic silence, of which nothing (except the château itself, according to the perspicacious *Feder-spiel*) warned the visitor: their three children were deaf and dumb!

Forêt-Claire dated from the end of the fifteenth century; a solid pile, its outer walls and towers dropping sheer into stagnant waters yellow as stretches of glistening mud. This fortress-home had been designed by some being with leanings at the same time towards luxury and prudence, grandiloquence and mistrust. Both the defences and the decorations were therefore multiplied. It had a squat appearance, being pentagonal in shape and too long for its height. Beneath its curved brown roofs it seemed to crouch in its moat like some gigantic somnolent marine monster—reddish and grey in colour, less evil than timid; some great marsh beast, too cumbersome to be dangerous.

Its strength was defensive only: its only desire to remain in peace, its great belly full of the fruits of the countryside. When you saw it at length, after passing through its protective maze of woods and coppices, it sprang up all at once, very close at hand, like some fantastic vision.

Gaston loved it like some living thing. He felt that in its hidden strength, its sad, sweet reverie, it embodied the spirit of the countryside. Even though his visits to Tainchebraye took up so much of his time, he came here frequently—to the great delight of the pathetic little deaf-mute children. He knew that his coming gave them such happiness!

These children were the gnomes of the house—that house of legend. They were its lively hobgoblins, its elves. The impression you received from their mutism was that, if they never spoke, it was because their own language had nothing in common with the language of men and did not wish to have. Little by little they had discovered all the secret hiding-places of the château,

scratching and digging their way into them like little terriers—lively, yapping terriers—for yap they did, the little nasal, hiccuping ejaculations, whenever they felt happy. They knew of five hiding-places in this castle whose double walls and false corners seemed designed especially for the purpose. One day they had Gaston shown into a sombre oak-panelled room, vaulted with brickwork and dismally lighted by a single window. Gaston waited quietly—and they appeared from the wall itself, from a cachette even more perfect than the others—their latest discovery. They did a gay dance around him, a dance punctuated by their little cries, their fingers darting this way and that.

For at Forêt-Claire this was the only means of communication. Their parents and the servants used it among themselves, to help the unfortunate children forget their infirmity as much as possible, for if they had seen movements of the lips they might have remembered their sad plight. Had it not been for the wind and the crowing of the cocks no sound would have been heard in this vast house, whose roofs covered almost an acre. And Gaston, too, had learned this sign-language.

The anger of the little deaf-mutes was terrible to watch. Since they could not give vent to it in cries or a rush of words, their rage took the form of convulsive movement. Writhing in frenzy, they would throw themselves to the ground while their snapping fingers could not work fast enough to translate the violence of their mood.

Two girls, and a boy, the youngest. To give them some idea of God—to provide some consoling poetry in their lives—their parents had created a marvellous chapel in this fortress and decorated it with painted statues which though of no artistic merit had a facile prettiness, with their tints of rose and blue, vermilion and gold. For every prayer, a whole tree of candles was lit, incense was burnt. Gaston thought of his mother's Christ, and it occurred to him that to expose Him here, upon the altar,

would have been scarcely less than an act of atrocious cruelty. These children were in no danger of forgetting the existence of suffering.

One of the little girls, almost a woman at fourteen, delighted the eye by her fairness and her strikingly beautiful complexion. She was movement, she was grace personified, with her long ballerina's legs that were never still. When she danced—for dance she did, through imitating others, young Gaston would wonder at her mysterious sense of rhythm. No melody could charm her ears, or lure her on to follow its beat, and yet her steps seemed to obey some relentless metronome, some instinctive timing. For their summer play-room the children had chosen a room at the top of the house which was called 'the armoury' (it probably had been so used: they were always on the upper floors). Gaston would stop on the threshold and watch them dancing. He would not enter lest he should disturb four white barn-owls which were looking on from a watch-tower, their heads with the big white saucer eyes wagging from side to side in time with the silent, swaying ballerinas. Later he noticed that animals seemed to have no fear of the deaf mutes.

Every week came a teacher from Paris who, placing his hand under their chins, would try to instil some faint rudiments of speech into them. Jacqueline, the eldest, while the teacher's fingers coaxed and pressed, would look at Gaston with anguished eyes. And suddenly her little hands would rise high above her head like quivering antennæ, and spell out: 'I want to learn to talk, for you.'

Gaston used to visit another friendly house too, where, assuredly, silence did not reign. Romantic circumstances had led to his becoming *persona grata* there. On the way to Tainchebraye one day he found that the Laigle road was up for repairs: he branched off along the hills to the south. While he was riding alongside the hedge of a park, he noticed a well-dressed little boy all by himself on the

edge of a pond. Suddenly, with the unreal, ridiculous incongruity of a dream, the little fellow overbalanced and took a header. Arrogant accomplished one of the best jumps of his career, and in a moment Gaston had plunged up to his waist in the water and was fishing out the bundle.

He mounted again and made at a gallop for the house, whose Louis XIII roofs he could see, though in his anxiety he did not recognize them, especially as the château was unfamiliar to him from this side.

The noise of his approach brought an old lady to the door—an old lady in a violet-coloured dress with bows of fiercely yellow ribbon. Her face, beneath a jaunty bonnet, was the colour of an olive. Gaston held out the child: dripping wet as they were there was no need for further explanation.

‘Is he *dead*?’ cried the old lady, horror-stricken.

‘No. Just wet.’

She rushed up to him, took the child, who was spluttering to prove that he was alive, and with extraordinary speed gave him three resounding smacks which would have awakened the seven sleepers. Then, in a continuation of the same movement she hugged him passionately, kissing him again and again, smothering her face with duckweed to the eyebrows as she did so—and without a word to the rescuer, disappeared. . . . Gaston, after an astonished pause, turned resolutely and began to ride off.

He was hailed from behind. Two gardeners were at his heels. ‘Are they going to arrest me?’ he thought. He waited. The lady in purple and canary-yellow was waving her arms like a windmill from the door.

‘Madame la Comtesse de Ségur begs monsieur to remain for luncheon.’

‘And for a change of clothes,’ shrieked the old lady.

For Gaston’s lanky legs only the gardener’s trousers were long enough. They lent him one of the Count’s velvet coats, and when he appeared thus Madame de

Ségur laughed till she was quite out of breath: and he, in his simplicity, joined in.

They were friends at once. After her laughter, she found charming words in which to thank him for rescuing one of her many grandchildren. She spoke very quickly, on rather a low note, rolling her r's. Her reputation was already established: she had published several volumes of her children's stories which had paid her well. Gaston knew about this activity of hers, and when he complimented her upon it, she replied:

'You're sitting in the *Mémoires d'un Ane* and you pulled Émile out of the *Aventures de Gribouille*.' For every sum of money she received from her books was invested immediately in improvement to the château, from new furniture in the drawing-room to embellishments for the park.

Madame de Ségur had considerably scandalized the district in the past, if only by her habit (a very practical one) of going about the fields in Russian boots. She caused amusement by her taste for the dramatic and by her terrible fits of anger which could be heard throughout the house and gardens. Thus, she came to have her place in legend, though in her own view it was never high enough. 'There's something to be said for the knout,' she once declared to Hachette when he lost his temper in her presence. But with age she grew a little calmer. 'Eugene,' her handsome husband, had caused her anxieties which she had never been able to suffer in silence, and on the wings of that redoubtable rolling voice the conjugal quarrels spread through the countryside.

People credited her with all the violent character of her Russian father—who had set fire to Moscow (though it is only fair to say that, being an unromantic soul, he always denied having taken any part in that act). So that when she arrived one day at Beaumesnil to dine, lowering with violent and resentful rage, the host remarked to the hostess: 'Eugene has a pretty meek air, and Sophie looks as if

she'd stepped out of the other world—so for heaven's sake don't let her get hold of the matches!'

It was with an inquisitive interest that Gaston visited this stronghold of Parisian aristocracy—a *milieu* so different from the one he had been used to. The influence of the capital, and that of a stern military tradition, was evident in the inhuman treatment meted out to the servants. While Madame de Ségur was reading to him one day from *Pauvre Blaise*, with feeling that wrung tears from the authoress herself, a servant came to tell her that the old coachman, who was leaving, would like to say good-bye.

'Brrring him in,' said the Countess, keeping one eye all the time on the manuscript which quivered on her knee. The old fellow, as he entered, seemed very moved. He was going at last after twenty years service.

'Au revoir, au revoir, my good friend—and good-day to you.' She spoke a banal enough French, that of her own writings.

The man hesitated. She did not even give him her hand. The indignant Gaston went up to the old fellow.

'Good-bye, Baptiste,' he smiled, in a friendly tone, shaking his hand warmly, 'and thanks for all you've done for me and my horses.' The man went out.

'Well, well, well,' grunted Madame de Ségur, on the point of losing her temper.

Gaston laughed.

'That's the Norman way—and perhaps the Russian one too. No doubt General Dourakhine would have kissed him on both cheeks.'

'“Dourak,” in Russian, means a fool,' replied the Countess vehemently; then she laughed in her turn.

She had christened Gaston her 'heron', on account of his long legs and his excursion into the water to save Émile—and perhaps also because, as she pronounced it in her rolling, nasal voice, the word had very much the same sound as 'hero'.

Her château, though it might make the journey a little longer, was a charming half-way house on the road to Tainchebraye. But it was not the distance that made Gaston's visits less frequent. He was breaking away from all that.

The stud was going very well and needed little attention from him. Amélien's renown would have been sufficient to reassure the breeders, without the well-known ability and natural flair of Jeannet and O'Bearn. And the breeders were important, for at Tainchebraye they were not only concerned with the upkeep of stallions, but received and boarded mares to be foaled in expert hands. The whole organization ran on oiled wheels.

Amélien was a different man here. If he came as a counsellor, it was also as the guest of his son—by courtesy almost. Gaston remained absolute master at Tainchebraye—which might have seemed astonishing but for the fact that in old families a young man was allowed to assume the responsibilities of his majority at an earlier age than usual, on analogy with the old royal custom. Gaston was on his own fief. Time had not moved on here; the deference paid him had its roots in respect for ancient lineage and hereditary possessions. At Tainchebraye, Amélien considered himself on a visit to his son, his tone was more amicable, though perhaps more colourless than at home. He had definitely refused the chief place at the fireside, which was reserved for the master so that he could without rising reach the bottles which lay warming before the fire (for Bordeaux in those days was served almost smoking-hot). If Gaston wanted his father's advice, he had to press hard for it.

For a long while Aimée had enjoyed, and deserved, a special position. The circumstances of Tainchebraye's death entitled her to rank as his morgannatic widow. She took her meals alone and managed everything. She paid all the servants and kept the accounts. Every one who could write was asked to keep a notebook in which his wages were entered: the more illiterate were 'notched'.

A stick was split in two lengthwise and the servant kept one half. Then, to mark the wages paid, the two pieces of the stick were put together again and a notch cut across both.

No change had been made in the way in which the château was run. Except for one more bunch of flowers and one more portrait—a poor miniature of Roger, done when he was a young man. Some imbecile artist had reduced the mask to a speck of black leather over the nose, and the fierce looks of the wounded man became merely ridiculous. Roger had thrown it aside, but Aimée's hand had retrieved it and kept it carefully. After his death, since no other portrait existed, it was framed. To give it some air of nobility, the cross of Saint Louis was set into the plain broad mount which surrounded the miniature. And then a curious thing happened: the ribbons of the cross, though they were flattened by the pressure of the protecting glass, crept upwards, and would soon cover the face with their pointed ends, as if with an additional mask of yellowing purple. Was this movement the gradual, imperceptible result of vibrations—of some mysterious currents? At any rate, fifty years later, his great-nephew, firmly matter-of-fact though he was, declared: 'Perhaps it's through being worn on that fiery heart that the ribbons look so scorched. . . . I know they've taken the frame off twice to adjust them, and now it needs doing again.'

Once a fortnight Gaston spent two days at Tainchebraye. He could have gone to sleep on horseback, for Arrogant knew every inch of the way. A horse's memory is extraordinary: even after three years the thoroughbred had not quite adopted La Bare, and he would whinney when he arrived at Tainchebraye, as if to say: 'Here I am at home again! How's everybody?' At La Bare the splendid chestnut always waited for the groom before he would go into his box, but here he went to his stall of his own accord, to the great delight of O'Bearn. At Tainche-

braye, Gaston was caught up into a whirl of activity, and the return journey was always slower than the outward one, for both rider and mount were tired. They lingered thoughtfully on the way.

The château of La Bare seemed just the same, and yet certain changes were apparent in the atmosphere. The Marquis was growing old; Madame Lieurre was dead; Ferline had silently left the house and Manfred was often away for long periods. Only Madame de La Bare kept her old cheerful tenor of life—though even she had known a period of slight depression.

Sultana's foal, who had lived up to the expectations roused by his birthmark—ah! how long ago that moment of its discovery seemed!—now belonged to Baron Schikler, the great sportsman. His exploits were all proudly followed.

CHAPTER XX

. . . *VOLUNTAS TUA*

. . . *ACQUIESCENCE* came calmly, peacefully, with an emotion so great and sweet that it hardly even disturbed his soul. Gaston had slept badly beneath burning sheets; he dedicated his life at dawn, in a rising ecstasy, an exaltation as gradual as that great light sweeping into the firmament.

It was spring-time and daybreak—daybreak, but not yet dawn. The cold air came in through the windows. Gaston threw a cloak over himself, went to the window-seat, and, standing up between the two round cupboards, joined his hands.

He looked out and listened, and his ears heard more than his eyes saw. The park seemed to melt into a misty, milky smoke which magnified and spiritualized it. Nothing showed very green, nor yet completely blue: a blue-grey haze veiled everything, and from the mist there rose, in a great concert, the song of unseen birds—so universal, so vehement, that sight was forgotten in the wonderment of hearing. A concert of flutes, strong yet shrill, with power in its numberless force, yet thinner and weaker in that every tiny instrument could be heard. Each branch seemed to bear its songster, singing away strongly enough to burst its tiny throat, in the expansive ecstasy of song. It was that brief moment of nature which comes at the beginning of a fine day and, a few instants later or a few seconds, dies with the first ray of the sun. A moment of icy silver and ringing crystal . . . a great wave of music breaks over the world, rolling westwards.

. . . No flight among the birds, none of that bright-winged darting from wood to wood; the motionless

branches quivered only with praise, with a mad, joyous morning prayer, the preliminary of action. The threatened bird, hunted everywhere by man and beast, living all his life in a state of war but without arms . . . the bird offers up praise for the coming day, because it will be sunny.

The young man clasped his hands more tightly; it seemed to him that the sky, like himself, was listening, leaning down to hear more closely; the earth, straining upwards in tenderness, was met and enfolded by the great pale trailing mists of the sky; the heavens stooped to gather up souls from earth with the hymn—for the hour was that at which the soul leaps upwards from the dying body. Gaston could perceive the very movement, the star-like quivering ascent of the disembodied spirits. He felt his very being dispersed, and his soul sprang upwards, his soul was an oblation, carried by those pure voices. He smiled; his praying hands unfolded, to glide slowly up and clasp each other once more above his head, and in their shadow, as they passed his closed eyes, he smiled twice, with each syllable of that word with which our lives begin and on which they close—the syllables of acceptance: 'A-men.'

And as he looked out again upon the frosty lawn he saw it darkened: the faint but immense shadow cast by the château, whose other façade had been the first to be touched by the sun. And then the birds fell silent: in a second they gushed and spurted upwards, setting the leaves aquiver—a fountain of twisting, stretching wings, brown, russet and blue. Their song gave place to little shouts, and the air was strident with the wild wheeling flight of swifts.

But he, ineffably weary with a weariness ten years long, went back to his bed, to lie there and fall into a sleep of childish peace, a milky peace . . . to the silken rustle of the swallows' wings. . . .

Shortly before nine o'clock, in a happiness that dulled

mind sought to cling to something real, something more real, to-day, than his son.

'Oh, Lord!' he uttered, at last. 'Are you absolutely decided?'

'Yes, father,' came Gaston's humble, saddened reply. He looked at his father.

Under the clear gaze of Monsieur de La Bare, which was lit with the same power in rage or sorrow, the youngster trembled. The head of the family did not fail to notice this.

'Don't be upset, my boy. Ah! It's strange, and hard, too! But sit down, Gaston.'

The Marquis began to walk up and down with quick strides, his arms folded. Gaston, sitting on a low chair, shut his eyes and waited. Now and again Amélien's billowing smock brushed him as he passed.

'Ah!' said La Bare, once more. It was a groan rather than an exclamation. 'But, there! It had to come in the end, I suppose. Triple fool that I've been—never took it seriously into account. But what'll become of Tainchebraye?'

How quickly his father had accepted his decision. No—it was only that the material aspect of things lay uppermost in his mind.

'Tainchebraye will go to Manfred's younger son,' replied Gaston, now on a calmer note. 'You're here, father—and you can look after it better than I can.'

'But it was for you that your Uncle Roger really meant it. Have you thought of that?'

'Yes . . . but I think uncle had an idea——'

'Perhaps he had. But what a courageous step you're taking! There's no need to be upset; you'll only hurt me, my child—my dear child!' For the Marquis had noticed a twitching in the jaw-muscles of those meagre cheeks. 'I'm a crabbed old man and a brutal one. I hate to . . . show my feelings. But I'm very fond of you, Gaston, if only my gruffness would let it come out. . . .'

'I know,' Gaston replied, in an unsteady voice.

'I'll respect your opinions. But, listen——'

The Marquis gathered himself together, marshalling his arguments. He pulled up a chair and sat down so close to Gaston that he was almost touching him.

'All I want to do is to put you on your guard against taking a resolution too hastily. You're eighteen. I won't criticize at all your way of looking at things—but it may have changed considerably by the time you're thirty. And then, it would be too late. Listen. I'm not a deeply religious man, but I'm a Christian none the less, and I respect the faith. In our family there've been very few priests but a prodigious number of nuns. There's your mother's uncle, of course, the Cardinal, but he really belongs to the old *règime*. He's a seigneur, assured of his kingdom—a prince. There's something of that attitude left in both our families. If we were to entertain a Cardinal, your mother would give him her place at table. He'd be like the king: wherever he goes, he's in his own home. But only in families like ours, Gaston. The way things are going, another twenty years will see an end to the greatness of a cardinal's position. I know, of course, that isn't the point—the spiritual side is the one that matters. And, coming to that, I may as well tell you, child, I distrust "vocations"—always have distrusted them. They're so vague, and to-day more than ever. Wait, I'll tell you something you must keep to yourself, and, to speak plainly, it's proved my fears to be well founded. You know Aunt Camille—the one in the convent at Nantes—the one that limps?'

'Yes.'

'I was brought up with her, as you know. She was unbelievably pious, Gaston! She never played at anything but making little altars. She even got me to say mass, standing on a sugar-box dressed up in a table-cloth! It was *neuvaines* and personal sacrifices all the time with her. Well, at eighteen—your age, just!—she took the veil, and all the family was delighted. Her mother, a bit of a shrew, announced the *fiançailles* of her daughter

with God. People laughed a bit. "He'll have a difficult mother-in-law," they said. But everybody approved—heartily. That's fifty years ago, pretty nearly. Well, Gaston, there it is. Camille hasn't got used to it yet.' (He hammered out each word.) 'She's sorry she ever took the veil!'

La Bare went on with a bitter, regretful note of anger in his voice:

'I look after her affairs for her—of course, you know. Whenever I'm in Brittany, having a look at the farms, I go and see her. It's like seeing a squirrel in a cage. Once, when I was saying good-bye, she turned to me with tears in her eyes: "Oh, Amélien," she said. "You'll see le Chesne again." (It's their place, a real Breton castle, you know; they're often worth seeing.) "Ah!" she went on, "If only I could go back to le Chesne! If only they'd give me that little corner underneath the stairs where they used to keep Aunt Clo's dog, I'd die of happiness, Amélien!" It wrung my heart, Gaston. I was so moved that I put it bluntly to her: "Come on, Camille, I'll take you back. Chuck all this!" Can you imagine anything more grotesque? Can you see your old father running off with a nun—a woman of seventy, at that! Well, I must admit that my proposition offended her. She told me with dignity that I must forget her weakness: it was just the memory of her young days. It was a cross sent her from above. Pah! That eternal word of theirs—a cross! But I couldn't forget it. How can you forget it when a woman has stretched out her hands to you and cried out as if she were drowning? Well, my dear Gaston, if such a "vocation" can bring a human being to a state like that after half a century of submission—I'm afraid I haven't much belief in vocations!

'Forgive me, my dear child, forgive me. But it's all the more dreadful because, you understand, I look upon Camille as a saint. A saint—there's no denying it! Listen; for the last ten years the railway's been running past the convent. And Camille always was as inquisitive

as they make 'em. She could have seen a train easily enough just by climbing up to the third story—the line runs at the bottom of a cutting. Well, she's offered her sacrifice to God—to her dying day, she'll never see a train; she'll never see that mechanical novelty that shakes the convent every ten minutes! What is one to think of that, eh? Gaston?

'One can—one must, even, suffer,' the boy murmured.

'Isn't there any better guide in these matters than a leaning towards that way of life? Or can you really drag yourself away from the world, as they say, by the force of your reason—idea leading to idea, and so on? That seems to me terribly dangerous! It's only the things that we can't foretell we're going to feel, that we really feel when the time comes. It's not a question of intelligence at all. It seems to me sometimes that life is like being mounted on a strange horse. Through using my legs and my reins I can do my best to avoid crashing into a wall, but the horse has got something to say in the matter as well. *But all this is just talk! There's one more thing. You're eighteen. I'm your father and I can speak freely: there's the vow of chastity.*'

Gaston blushed crimson.

'My poor child—that vow was never a concern of us Hordons. You're taking on, for life, something that you know nothing about. There've only been two Hordons to turn priests, and I can assure you that it sat pretty lightly on them, that vow of chastity. Our younger sons used to make for the Order of Malta, where a few falls from grace weren't noticed so much. What stories there are about them, too! Uncle Galart, the commander. Father Laval-Montmorency, with his Maugrabine, and our own Commander de Bonneville!' He hesitated. 'I myself, Gaston'—his voice became dry and toneless—'I'm no example.'

In this there was something fine, the evidence of a great sensibility which the boy did not fail to perceive.

This avowal, this confession, seemed to imply that his father had already accepted his priesthood in his heart. Gaston got up, trembling, and his voice was desperate as he pleaded. There was such force in his few protesting words that La Bare swung his chair round and took his son by the shoulders, overcome by an emotion in which he felt himself exalted. He held Gaston close. But in a very few moments his hatred of such displays of tenderness made him ask himself instinctively, 'How are we going to get out of this?' And angrily the reply came: 'We won't!' Thus they remained, so close to one another, closer in spirit than they had ever been.

At length the Marquis put his straggling thoughts and emotions in order.

'Gaston, my son, we've just experienced one of the best moments in our affection for one another.'

'Yes,' answered the young man.

'And I feel the better for it. I'm too hard. But let's get things straight. Are you willing to wait? Let me put this to you. Could you do the same as Bonnechose, the Cardinal? There he is now, Primate of Rouen; but he was in his thirties when he took orders. Before that he'd studied law and held all sorts of official positions. And so, when the moment came for him to decide, he was able to say to himself, "I know what I'm leaving behind me" for that's all one ever knows: what lies in one's past. "I despise it: it can go." But you—you're still in the nest, and you want to cross the sea straight off. Do you feel strong enough?'

'Well—to be exact, no,' Gaston replied. 'But I think I ought not to wait, if I'm ever to reach my goal.' He smiled timidly, resorting to his father's metaphor, 'If I put it off, I shall never strengthen my wings.'

The Marquis left his chair, and with a muttered ejaculation began to pace the office once more.

'There we are, back at the same point—the call, the vocation! I can't think about it any more, my boy. I

can't bear to. Listen. I've never been more moved. I've had moments with you, this morning, that make one feel greater. But it's too much all at once. We'll talk about this again some time next week. What does your mother say?'

'I've said nothing to her yet.'

'What? You haven't?'

With his old gruffness, he stared at his son so fixedly that Gaston misread his thoughts.

'I thought . . . I should tell you first. Don't be angry, papa,' he begged. 'I thought that to begin with mummy wouldn't have been—very brave.' Something of his old assurance came back and he stood upright again. 'For if you . . . had refused me, it would have been better that mummy should never know anything about it.'

'Ah!' said the Marquis, with well-concealed but violent admiration. 'So—if I'd said "No" in so many words, you'd accept that, eh? And as for your mother—you were afraid—own up—that she'd beard the lion in his den, in defence of your idea? Ah, fine! Gaston, what an officer you'd have made in the old days!'

He went over to the window, stared out and blew his nose; his gaze seemed to be blasting the distant gates. Then, clearing his throat, he returned to his chair.

'It's unbearable, hanging about before taking a decision. Let's go and see the Cardinal, shall we? I'll speak to him, and you can talk to him too. We'll ask his advice.'

'Yes, let's do that. And what about mummy?'

'Go and meet her at the gates. That's the best place to tell her anything so momentous. Tell her that I don't know what to think, myself—that I'm very much moved. Tell her not to talk to me about it much. Go round by the stables. I want a horse. Ouf! Shake hands, Gaston. Too much affection we've shown to-day. But it was good—and upsetting too.'

Can one ever foresee a woman's reaction? Madame de

La Bare protested vehemently and resisted far more than her husband had done before she would accept the idea. She seemed both shocked and distressed. Did she regard this as treason on the part of her child? Was she hurt by the fact of not being the first to learn of her son's decision? She needed all her faith and all her spirit of sacrifice before she could accept it and get used to it.

Gaston was tired, terribly tired.

CHAPTER XXI

CARDINAL BONNECHOSE

THE journey to Rouen was made by road in a two-horsed phaeton, relays having been arranged in advance. The Marquis drove and had Gaston sitting beside him. Both were in thoughtful mood: Amélien very reticent. But from time to time, to show that he was not angry, he would touch Gaston's knee with his free hand and nod.

Gaston, surrounded by the slumbering loveliness of the summer countryside, found himself a prey to dreams and memories. He remembered the start of another journey, and another dedication, when the thought of Abraham's sacrifice had caused him such burning moments. Had not that been a warning—a premonition? For to-day the sacrifice was being really accomplished, but tears no longer sprang to his eyes as they had done to the child's. His mood was calm, melancholy, even—almost mournful. And he would have condemned himself for this tepidity, this hardness of heart—did not Saint Louis ask on his knees for the gift of tears?—if he had not been clear-eyed enough to see that it was only physical weariness which had for the time being quenched his ardour.

When they had passed through Brionne and were going down the hill towards Bec, the famous abbey came into view, distinguished by its tower, placed so fittingly in the heart of the whole landscape. La Bare pointed to it with his whip—with a remark which he phrased in his poor German, on account of the servant's presence.

'You wouldn't go so far as to become a monk?'

'No, father,' Gaston replied, in the same language—his knowledge of which, thanks to Federspiel, was

excellent. 'I'd like to be of more use—more material use.'

'You're not thinking of an order—like the Jesuits? You'd find yourself less—less *déclassé* there.'

'The Jesuits teach. What could I teach—except equitation! No, I should like to help our peasants.'

'I thought as much,' growled La Bare.

They had lunch on the way, and came to the Archbishop's palace in the afternoon. The reception rooms were full of people. La Bare sent in his card, and word came that the Cardinal would see him when the official reception had been brought to a close. His Eminence was sorry to keep him waiting.

The man they were to see remains a figure of some greatness and nobility. The circumstances of his life made him the centre of a growing body of legend: it even increases to-day in spite of the death of oral tradition. He possessed, indeed, that essential quality for a hero of legend—distinctive looks. Chapu's statue in the cathedral is sufficient testimony. Very tall and slim, without an ounce of superfluous flesh, his dignity was enhanced by an attitude of constant self-consciousness. 'He always seems to be in church,' said his contemporaries, 'or ready for battle.' Without being exactly stiff, he guarded against the slightest informality. (Madame de Bernberg, who detested him because she had never been able to annex him, described him as 'a serpent rearing on its tail'.) His features were very fine, regular and aquiline, but their harmony was diminished by a grimly impressive forehead, uncompromising and inscrutable. 'Some of us seem to carry their shoulders—the strong; others carry their paunches—the fat; but all he carried was his cranium,' observed the Marquis de Sémerville. As a belfry is designed to house the bells, so the whole rigidity of that tall body seemed intended for no other purpose than to put that decisive brow at a more formidable

angle. Beneath the arch of the frontal bones, the eyes, once forget-me-not blue but now faded and grey, were but two openings upon a great inner clarity.

It was only when he smiled or when he spoke that the intense intellectuality of his air gave place to saintliness.

Henri Marie Gaston de Bonnechose had known some strange vicissitudes in life; they were no secret to his flock and did not decrease his mysterious appeal. His father had been an *émigré*; his mother, a Mademoiselle Sachs, a lovely Dutch Protestant woman of Creole extraction, of whom Lally Tollendal wrote: 'She is the union of all that allures with all that commands respect.' It was from her that the lordly prelate had inherited his dignity and his charm. He had been brought up to respect both cults—the Catholic and the Lutheran, but the emphasis lay heavily upon the latter. This was due to the strength and purity of his mother's example. His father still retained his childishly vain veneration for the 'philosophes'.

At the time appointed for him to choose which of the two faiths he would adopt, Bonnechose had profited from a strange chain of circumstances which were not without their influence upon his decision.

Won over by the Roman Catholic faith, he was loath to adopt it finally without his mother's consent. He wrote no less than three letters in which he formulated his reasons and explained his difficulties. The piety of Madame de Bonnechose had touched him deeply. In her he was aware of a rare spiritual quality, and he felt the need of her blessing. None of his letters ever reached her! With the result that he construed her silence to mean that she left him absolutely free to choose: he abjured Protestantism and communicated. That same evening, Madame de Bonnechose, knowing nothing of the trend of events, arrived in Paris from Holland in no mood to give in without a struggle.

The hand of Fate seemed apparent.

His story continues with episodes of an almost romantic nature. Henri de Bonnechose was studying law, phil-

osophy, and languages—excelling in everything he undertook, which in the true tradition of the eighteenth century and 'Émile' did not exclude a manual occupation: the Cardinal could turn a lathe like Father Plumier himself! And now comes the 'English episode' in our chaste Henri's life. He accompanied a friend to England, and the friend, alas! took his mistress along with him—an English girl, most lovely of English swans. This young person had scarcely landed on her native soil before she blushed for her sin, and was inclined to rush back upon the bosom of her family, where she might forget the error of her ways. Henri employed all his persuasion to strengthen her in this virtuous decision, and it was with a painful pleasure that he found the gentlemanly instinct that urged him to support his friend fading in his zeal for proselytism—especially as it became clear to him that he loved: he in his turn had been caught by the seductive Madeleine.

His efforts were in vain. Here was reality; reality with all its deep attractions was stronger than the dream, and poor Henri succeeded only in forging anew those shackles of the flesh which he had sought to break.

All his life he shuddered at that burning abyss whose edge he had skirted. He was now beginning to become aware of his vocation—a vocation strengthened by that tenderness towards the other sex which he conquered in himself. He felt this tenderness a second time, but its object, a young girl of the utmost purity, had died—he had but glimpsed an angel on her death-bed. This was Élise de Montalembert, the sister of the great Christian preacher, who was then a young man. Henri's sensibility led him to adopt, in the presence of her inconsolable family, an almost religious rôle.

His third passion was so strong that he proposed marriage to Eulalie de Gevigney, who had inspired it. 'You are destined to marry the Church alone,' she replied. He hesitated, but finally made his decision, and three months later he was pursuing Eulalie again, this time to

tell her that she was right. Both of them knelt down, weeping together in heart-breaking fashion and praying fervently. He never forgot her: all his life he kept a memento of her in his breviary.

The Marquis was beginning to grow impatient, and when at last he entered the private audience chamber—the Cardinal stepping forward to meet him—he glared fiercely at the two secretaries before he knelt down and kissed the ring.

‘Monseigneur,’ he began, ‘I wish to present to Your Eminence my younger son, who would be grateful for a little private talk.’

A footman, dressed in black and wearing a silver chain, was sealing letters.

‘What is it, my dear friend?’ said the Cardinal.

‘He will tell Your Eminence himself, if Your Eminence will be so good as to accord him this favour.’

The Cardinal smiled. He led Gaston off into a little inner room. The Marquis had to wait once more, for a long time. The secretaries studied him covertly, and sniffed if he happened to catch their eye.

The Cardinal reappeared at last—alone. He paused slightly at the door to dismiss his secretaries with a nod. The Marquis’s eyes followed them as they withdrew—they might have been personal enemies. When they were alone, the Cardinal came up to La Bare and held out his hands warmly.

Amélien was all impatience.

‘... couldn’t have stood it much longer! Well? What’s happened? What did you tell him? Is it settled?’

‘I think so, and I thank God for it,’ came the Cardinal’s reply. ‘Listen, Amélien—and don’t be angry, or upset....’

‘Don’t get upset!’ That was good advice! The Cardinal and the Marquis were of exactly the same age, and they had spent a good many of their young days together, for La Bare and La Boulaie were neighbouring estates.

The Cardinal could appreciate the Marquis's rough good sense, but he was a little afraid of it. He liked Amélien. Monseigneur de Bonnechose never spoke of his young brother Louis, the last of the Chouans, but those who had known Louis or been his friends had first claim upon his time, and La Bare had been his most faithful and devoted companion.

Amélien poured out all his arguments, his humiliation, his own thoughts on the matter, with that vigorous human good sense of his, while the Cardinal imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders and pointed upwards.

'Heaven! Yes—I know, it's always "Heaven". Well, Henri, "God helps those who help themselves", that's what they say, isn't it? But they don't say, "Help Heaven to ruin your life"! Can't we leave Heaven out of it? A vocation isn't sure enough. The child is suffering, hesitating. This religious vocation, this call he feels, it's nothing to his vocation as a horseman. Yes—that's where his real vocation lies!'

'Amélien—Amélien—you can't compare——'

'That much is at least certain, and if we're to push these vocations to their farthest conclusions, you might as well make him a circus rider—a Franconi, instead of a Quelen.'

'My friend—my friend—please. I know very well that equestrian skill is always honoured in our families—but to-day all that is only a pastime.'

'As you wish, Eminence,' said the Marquis sombrely, 'but the boy's a horseman worthy to rank with the Comte d'Aure. You care nothing for that, do you? You were never a horseman.'

'I wasn't left behind when we went riding, Amélien.'

'Of course not—the Bonnechose who couldn't ride hasn't been born yet. But, Henri, although you can sit a horse and get along on horseback, you've never really *ridden* a horse in your life! Not like poor Louis. What a rider he was! Or like Gaston.'

'Still——' The Cardinal broke off, smiling as he realized his own pique.

'Taratata! Don't take it to heart! You can't have everything. If only there were still some equestrian orders left—like the Templars or the Order of Calatrava—that would be the place for Gaston. Just look at the ludicrous aspect of it for a moment, Henri! Here's a boy who inherits a fine stable—a boy who could wield such a mighty influence in this part of the world as Tainchebraye's heir—political influence first, yes—but religious as well, with his piety—and there's plenty of scope for it, after Roger—and what do you want to make of him? Not a preacher, nor a bishop, nor even a teacher. He can't speak well: why, he stutters! So all you'll make of him is a little village priest, with an ugly hag of a house-keeper and cow-dung on his boots . . . just a registrar of marriages and deaths—a little holy stamp-licker. And he's a La Bare, Henri! You can persuade him. Use your power!'

'No, Amélien, I leave him to the ways of God.'

'The ways of God have led you post haste to the Archbishopric of Rouen, so you naturally find them satisfactory. Well, you're not going to help me make the boy see reason?'

'Reason such as you understand it, my friend, has no place here.'

'Still, I stick to my point. Better the first in your village than last in Rome. As one of the breeders of Perche, Gaston's influence would have been a good deal more valuable than as one of your clergy, where they'll be only too glad of the chance of making fun of one of us in the pulpit. A little priest—just a butt for their jibes—moralizing to a handful of clods who'll forget all his fine teaching for the first pretty face that comes along! Sheer waste, Henri, sheer waste! And they aren't so many of us left!'

'And yet, Amélien, what if this little priest should become a saint?'

The Marquis fell suddenly silent. He looked at his old playfellow, whose majestic red-robed figure and pale face gave him almost a supernatural appearance.

'A saint,' he murmured, 'a saint! That would honour us indeed! We are certainly in need of a saint. He'd be the first among us. Where have you hidden him, your saint?'

'In my private chapel, offering thanks. Go and give him your blessing. I'll send you to him.'

The Marquis was beaten already. He knew it, but a man does not perish without a struggle.

'I won't oppose it any longer,' he said finally, 'only he must wait till he's twenty-five before taking his vows. You were thirty, Henri, before you crossed the Rubicon. Au revoir. No, forgive me, not your ring. I can't stand all that sort of thing. Good-bye.'

A fortnight later, at the end of September, Gaston entered the seminary and put on the cassock.

CHAPTER XXII

L'ABBÉ GASS'

WHEN Gaston reappeared at La Bare the verdict went against him from the first minute. A burst of laughter greeted him: it was never to cease. His parents, indeed, had been to see him in the course of the school year, but their emotion had softened them; they had felt chastened in that environment where there were two hundred and fifty cassocks no less ungainly and ridiculous than their son's. But at La Bare, in this familiar luxurious setting, the young man seemed so absolutely, so violently out of place that one could not but smile—or pity him. For sensitivity always has these two sides—raillery and tenderness. But in France, the latter is short-lived and rarely exhibited.

The cassock was so huge, and the face peering out of it so small—that face which in spite of its pallor was still covered with pimples; and the hat was so big and so deep that before he could see properly, Gaston had to tilt up his nose; and the absurdity of those enormous skirts flapping against his horseman's bow-legs. . . ! Manfred had to flee in order to laugh in secret, and found the whole household giggling behind doors. Madame de La Bare herself could hardly repress a smile.

'I'm not a very handsome sight, am I?' said Gaston, with his frank smile. He looked so awkward, with his curved spine and his short body wobbling on those lanky legs. But beneath the smile, the suffering was evident.

'Bah!' growled the Marquis. 'I'd like you better in a red coat, but the conscript always looks a bit queer when he comes home again. You must fill out a bit, though, or you'll never make a canon! Are you going to keep to that all the holidays?'

‘Yes.’

‘Well, it needn’t stop you riding. We’ll get them to put a vent in the back. No priest’s mule for you. And now let’s get along to the stables.’

The stables were empty of grooms. The men had all hidden lest they should hurt his feelings. Loyal as they were, even they could not contain themselves. ‘I have to watch myself at meal-times,’ the butler affirmed. ‘Of course, he’s sitting down then, but it seems to swallow him up. And the sleeves are too short—it makes his wrists look like a strangler’s!’ The winter had covered his hands with obstinate chilblains and the swellings had not disappeared.

‘Well, are you happy there?’ And then the Marquis changed his question, for he saw by the pain which dilated his son’s eyes that it was inappropriate. ‘I mean—are things going all right?’

‘Yes, father. I’m trying to get used to it. They’re good fellows.’

He said nothing of the incessant suffering he went through in the seminary. The souls in training there might be noble enough, but the bodies they inhabited were for the most part those of peasants. Gaston would have reproached himself for inclining towards the few whose better standard of upbringing made them more congenial to him. He found himself plunged all at once, without a moment’s privacy, into the midst of physical grossness. And his own equivocal position was made more painful by a sad contrast between his birth and his scholastic attainments. The news that the ‘son of the Marquis de La Bare’ was at the seminary spread quickly. Around him he was aware of curiosity and respect, and he would have liked to prove his worthiness by the quality of his work, for though he had no personal vanity whatsoever, he did not wish to deceive and disappoint these peasant fellows. But it was no good. His rebellious memory paralysed him, especially here, where so much had to be

learned by heart, and where he was competing against younger brains which recorded automatically and shone through their assurance.

It was fortunate that the subtlety of his intelligence found scope for itself in certain lessons, and some of the teachers, sympathizing with him, tried to give him confidence by public compliments. And then how grateful Gaston was to God—God who had come to the aid not of himself but of the La Bares, by thus preventing those warriors from being altogether mocked in the wretched unworthiness of their descendant.

At the same time, other excellent priests were not afraid to relegate him to the bottom of the class, however little he might merit such a lowly place. Perhaps they only wished to test the strength of his vocation by making things as hard as possible for him.

He had grown even thinner, and there was something of a hunted look in his eyes. At the close of his first lunch at home, he refused the coffee he had once been so fond of for fear of cultivating a taste for it again. But at this Madame de La Bare protested with some anger. 'Drink it! The rest of them don't deprive themselves, and you've got to get strong.' He raised his cup and saucer at this, a little awkwardly, and stirred it for a long time.

When he had left the little drawing-room, the Marquis spoke thoughtfully:

"'A thin lining's no good for a thin coat', ' he quoted. 'Perhaps he's too delicate for a strict life like that. If he fell ill, couldn't I put an end to the whole idea?'

The ridiculous aspect of his son's appearance no longer worried the Marquis, though Madame de La Bare was a little apprehensive of its effect on her dinner-parties. She guessed that the general attitude, if unmalicious, would be irrepressibly gay. There would be laughter, good-natured, perhaps, but laughter all the same. She was less of an aristocrat than her husband, and her family was not so old. In her there still existed something that

had been necessary to her ancestors: a feeling that dignity of bearing was all-important, together with reticence, and a certain pose—elements of respectability by which those powerful officials, honest, intelligent, energetic, had risen in the world. While with the La Bares, all that could go to the devil! They were Hordons, and indisputable. 'The Hordon that Hasting made Bishop of Chartres in 820 must have cut as funny a figure as Gaston,' laughed the Marquis.

Madame de La Bare tried to smarten her son up a bit. 'One costume's no better than another,' she pointed out gently. 'It all depends on the way you wear it!'

'I'm afraid we must resign ourselves—I'm bound to cause you all a little embarrassment,' replied the seminarist. 'But I'll do anything you wish.'

But to what avail? His nickname was already born. For all Ouche and Perche, for the mocking Lieuvain and indifferent Auge, he had become 'l'Abbé Gass'—and with the 'g' pronounced as a 'c', it became '*la bécasse*'—the woodcock, that silly, sombre, clumsy-winged bird.

Nor did his horse-riding rehabilitate him. It only seemed to emphasize the difference. It was a physical necessity, and he rode as much for that reason as for enjoyment. It lifted some of the weight from his heart.

People were used to seeing curés riding. The parish priests were beginning to use traps, but some of their churches could not be reached except on horseback. Cardinal Bonnechose, when he was Bishop of Carcassonne, used to make his pastoral visits round the countryside on a horse. It was the miller's animal, with a bell on its neck, which was reserved for his use. His love for riding, whatever Amélien might think of his horsemanship, caused some consternation among his pious fellows. The Bishop was always in front. 'Come on, Monsieur Rigal, what's happened to you?' And the grand-vicaire, caught between his mule, a storm, and a precipice in the

Cevennes, would groan: 'Ah! Monseigneur, I'm fighting for my life!'

When visiting their flock the priests, like the doctors, be-trode some mule or ancient mare. Their melancholy, tragic jog-trot along the lanes was a familiar sight, and the labourers in the fields would gaze after the black-garbed figure, asking one another: 'Who's dead?'

Very mild indeed was their prowess. And even if Gaston could have laid aside his own proud skill, Arrogant stormed through the countryside like a thunder-clap. The harvest fields would pale suddenly as the light of a brighter and more glowing gold flashed past them, slashed with a black zigzag line. Against the gloom of the dark woods and thickets, a frenzy of flames would suddenly appear, the shape of a horse, limbs shining, hoofs flashing fire, ringed with black—all that was visible of the abbé, for the upper part of his body sped by unseen against the dark background. On the crest of a hill the race-course gallop would be still more noticeable, with the two skirts of the cassock, blowing out behind, held stiff in flight—still as two coffin-lids.

Gaston would ride straight into the wind, charging it, like a personal enemy, fighting against it. His big hat would not have stayed on as far as the gates. A sacristan's skull-cap replaced it now, and the tassel-thread—the 'wick'—stung the air like the point of steel on a Saracen's helmet. His boots shone like steel. But no gloves now—a sore privation, and one which for him bordered almost upon indecency. Without gloves he was hardly clothed, But at the seminary they were not worn. . . .

And the same people who would have been delighted and full of admiration to come across 'Monsieur Gaston' galloping on his splendid horse, were somewhat shocked when the rider was the abbé. They said little, but they felt mildly scandalized. For in his mad speed they thought they perceived an implicit avowal of passion. Out of their old habit of friendliness the peasants still smiled at

him and, with reluctant admiration, declared: 'He's got fire in his thighs, then, after all!' And they soon began to add: 'And the devil in his body!'—hardly an ecclesiastical state of affairs!

And now, too, as if in revenge for all he had renounced, he only tried out the most powerful stallions, the most untamable. Stallions that could only be managed with the help of a cavesson, Gaston would be riding with an ordinary bit after a mere two days. He foundered them. He would mount them with a sort of unavowed bravado, relishing the danger, and the skill of his hands and his legs, and his balance was such that in the end he dominated these monsters: breaking them, and putting them together again.

'Magnificent!' the Marquis muttered. 'But did you want to break your neck this morning?' And he looked down from his own mount, quiet now, as Gaston jumped off his, abandoning to two men a horse absolutely white with sweat, foaming like a sea-shore lashed by the stormy sea; beaten and tamed.

'It's . . . it's easier than a Latin version!' Gaston gasped in response, with his old boyish smile.

He embarrassed his family, there was no denying it. They loved him still, of course, but his presence militated curiously against the comfort of those around him. At meals, first of all. It had never been the La Bare custom to say grace, unless a priest were being entertained, when he would be invited to bless the table. At the first lunch with Gaston at home, while the Marquis was waiting for his wife to sit down before doing so himself, the seminarist crossed himself and began to pray in silence. The Marquis, courteous fellow—if he had been entertaining a Chinaman he would have attempted the chin-chin—immediately did likewise; but understood at once that the ceremony, complicated by grace afterwards, would henceforward be continued at all meals, even if guests were present. . . . H'm!

And then again, involuntarily, this boyish cassock recalled to mind the 'honours' accorded to the little freshly tonsured peasants. The tone of the conversation changed accordingly: every one became extremely affable, as if to put some stranger at his ease. Gaston was not unaware of this: he felt that he was being excluded from the family circle. And now there came into play the unbelievably subtle complexities of sensitive minds, outwardly so simple. The lay La Bares perceived this ostracism, and each reacted by assuming his normal manner, exaggerating it woefully. Thus Manfred yawned and averred that he was very sleepy indeed. Madame de La Bare teased her husband and children, as she would never have done had guests been present. Amélien growled like a wild beast. It was all well counterfeited and it deceived nobody.

When guests were present things were worse still. Even the women's frocks changed. *Décolleté* was impossible with a priest at table, so they came in high-necked dresses, which are far less elegant. And the Marquis wondered why, for all his crystal glass, his fine silver and Saxony-ware, and his footmen, his dinners were not completely satisfactory. They lacked the women's shoulders, those jewels now concealed.

And La Bare guessed that his son was frightening guests away. This ascetic, by heaven! was becoming nothing less than a permanent reproach, brandishing his asceticism under your very nose—together with the problems of religion and repentance too. A little peasant curé's presence would have had no such result: rather the opposite, for the fact of his being a priest was obviously to his material advantage. But Gaston! The rich seigneur of Tainchebraye, whose wealth rumour had trebled, renouncing all things! For one 'of them' to sanctify himself was as disturbing as if one of them had turned criminal.

And at this period they were entertaining a good deal

at La Bare, in the hope of finding a bride for Manfred, who seemed somewhat disinclined for matrimony. The parents of suitable aspirants looked indulgently upon the priestling, whose vocation had doubled his elder brother's future wealth. But the quality of the house suffered. Certainly, Gaston's unprepossessing gawkinsness and his timidity did not add to the dignity of the château, but a subtle disdain looked deeper and found the real object it despised in the career he had chosen. It made the household look a little too provincial. The eighteenth century and the Court still set the standard. To be 'philosophe', to be sceptical—this was still the ideal for a prominent family, and one blessed with a priest-apostle was a little too bourgeois. This had probably been at the back of La Bare's mind when he asked his son:

'Aren't there any fancy uniforms in your regiment? A dash of colour, or polish, or silk?'

'Oh no,' came the answer, 'just the plain black, plain and clean. It's rather difficult with black, you know.'

If it had been possible to turn Gaston into a dandified, somewhat effeminate, amateur abbé—a stage ecclesiastic—then the world, the fashionable world, would have accepted him. But with this rude prophet there was nothing to be done.

Then came a very grand dinner, at which three dukes were to be present. 'Need I . . . am I really necessary?' asked Gaston.

A silence answered him.

'Do as you wish,' said Madame de La Bare, at length.

But the three of them were gloomy enough as the interminable courses followed one another.

Behind the curtains of his little room with the round cupboards Gaston watched the fine carriages arrive and turn, but he felt that to do so was a silent reproach to his parents, and turned away from the window.

Gaston was on his way to Forêt-Claire. The August weather heralded the approach of autumn in the hushed

expectancy, the soft melancholy of the sunlight. Even Arrogant's pace was languid. The young man reproached himself for having neglected his poor little deaf-mute friends for so long. Perhaps he was afraid of their malicious laughter, afraid that his clumsy cassock would provoke the usual effect. . . . What matter! He must go and see them.

He was near enough now to distinguish the protective woods that shielded the house: surly, crabbed, these trees were, with their twisting, writhing branches. They had been planted to form a great maze, the more to hide the house—a labyrinth in which the paths looked so alike that it was easy to lose one's way. A star-shaped space at the centre marked the intersection of eight avenues. A big stone vase had adorned it once, but now only the broken pedestal remained. And Gaston saw with surprise that on this pedestal a little light-coloured statue had sprung up. He pushed Arrogant forward, and with sudden emotion saw that it was Jacqueline, the eldest—but how grown up she was now—waiting for him, scanning the numerous paths. He cried out gaily. Her sight was a little short, but she had recognized him and was waving her arms. She'd become quite a young woman. Gaston slowed down and stopped beside her. He had forgotten the costume he wore, but he saw her smile, her lovely eyes full of tears. The sight of them stirred him. Her little agile fingers sent out words of welcome. She stretched out her arms for him to put her on his horse in front of him, as he had always done in the past. But now, at sixteen, her beauty had that precocious milky flowering that goes with reddish-gold hair, and Gaston no longer dared. He jumped down from his horse. On the pedestal Jacqueline was taller than he, and, still crying a little, she put her hands on his shoulders, contemplating him in sorrowful delight. Then her fingers began their hasty play again, as if drawing sound from unseen keys. He read her words, and replied. Yes, he had been at Séz for a year, at the seminary, and he was sorry he had not come earlier in his holidays. A

sudden pity touched him, for the girl's fingers had said: 'You've been home three weeks, and I've come here every day to wait for you.'

He was aware of a certain pain, a certain unexpected fear. And yet a feeling of extraordinary sweetness warmed his heart. That laughter, that bitter laughter which pursued him everywhere—here, it was changed to tears. 'Tender Jacqueline.'

'Are you happy?' asked those quick fingers.

And this time, in this atmosphere of utter truth and simplicity, it seemed to him impossible to conceal anything, nor could he hide that dull pain, that part of him which could not accept, but resisted still, and sometimes even came between him and God.

'I don't hope to be,' his fingers replied, and in spite of himself, he too felt tears in his eyes. She uttered her raucous little cry, like that of an angry swan. Despair? He remembered that terrible, indecent anger of hers in the past. He drew her close to him to console her. Jacqueline clung to him and imprisoned his hands in her own, so that the only communication between them now lay in this sudden contact of their bodies. Arrogant stood looking at them with that slow movement of neck and shoulders by which a horse seems to express his disapproval. Gaston grew alarmed. He put the girl gently from him, but kept his arm upon her shoulder like a reassuring yoke. They walked on. Jacqueline took his idle hand in both of hers as if to increase the dear weight of that yoke. And from time to time she looked up at him with a smile. The sun was shining on her burnished hair and gleamed translucent on her parted lips. The sensation of strength and sweetness surprised Gaston. He tried to withdraw his arm.

'No! Why must you abandon everything? You were our only friend. All the kindness you brought us, you alone could give. The solitude we live in deepens, the older we grow. And now I can understand our misfortune better, it'll only grow more terrible from now on.

... Gaston!' The exclamation was achieved by a jerk of her lovely body, a toss of her head.

They were facing each other now. Gaston replied that he would come back here to some neighbouring village. He would never forsake her.

But he was forsaking her! The three of them had more need of him than anyone else. Retract—for Jacqueline's sake!

'I can't, I've made my sacrifice; but I'll pray for you, and all the warmth of my friendship will always be yours, Jacqueline.'

And Gaston felt that he must leave her now.

For a second she remained motionless, as if suffocating. Then she ran towards him, and to his horror he heard an articulate sound from that little mouth—a dull, painful sound, in which he could just distinguish the words, 'I love you'. The accent was uncertain and too heavy—an unnatural, toneless language that the child had learned at last and reserved for her avowal. 'I love you,' she repeated, in a sort of jerky gurgle torn from her struggling throat.

Gaston trembled. He could not hide the painful impression it had made on him.

'Jacqueline!'

She understood his repulsion, and turned away her head, while her quick hands began spelling out their message again.

I love you . . . for all my life . . . have pity!'

CHAPTER XXIII

. . . PRINCE OF CAPPADOCIA

MONSEIGNEUR DE BONNECHOSE, for all his saintly dignity, was very fond of a change of scene. At Rouen, whatever the weather, he went out for two hours a day. His horses would take him into the countryside, and there he would walk at will. His pastoral journeys had become his recreation. His letters and journals reveal the intimate enjoyment he found in the open fields—a trait unusual enough in one of his unparalleled and unprecedented position.

The Cardinal was ecclesiastical adviser to the Emperor, and to the Pope, for France. The former would grant him an audience at any time, and in two months Pius IX wrote him no less than three personal letters. It must be remembered that at this period France was the first Catholic country in the world. And yet the corner of a meadow, a gentle slope of ploughland, could delight the Cardinal's heart.

'Well, Monsieur Delahaye,' he would remark, when they found themselves miles from anywhere in some remote parish, 'we're on holiday!'

Monsieur Delahaye, his grand-vicaire, would be hardly so enthusiastic; he was burdened with the responsibility of arranging the itineraries and writing the reports. It was no holiday for him!

'Yes, certainly it's a holiday for us,' His Eminence would go on. 'We're breathing the fresh air, we're travelling through a beautiful countryside, and every one fêtes us as we go!'

Outwardly the Cardinal was an intimidating figure.

He had been regarded for a long time as a man without a heart; but now his generosity was fully appreciated. Emile Olivier might criticize him on the grounds that his ecclesiastical charm was an acquired virtue, but Olivier, the man of politics, the *déclassé*, was judging another by himself. He was incapable of comprehending a *natural* mixture of greatness and kindness such as the Cardinal displayed. It is true that at times the kindness would disappear, to be replaced by explosions of anger. But such outbreaks were rare, and they were the index of a frank nature. The astute Normans were not misled.

He discovered, as, for instance, during a famous lunch at Neufchâtel, or as some have it, at Écouis, that the eminence of his position was apt to ruin people's appetites. He was the guest of honour at this lunch, and the general abstemiousness at the tables astonished him. The company ate little, drank nothing, and did not exchange more than half a dozen words. 'They're quite seraphic!' thought the Cardinal, but his observant eye did not fail to notice that their bull necks, pigs' cheeks and high colour marked them as normally no less carnivorous than most.

The proceedings drew to a close at last, after the highest blessings had been bestowed upon the fasters. But when he was four miles on his way, Monseigneur discovered that his famous and well-loved breviary, which he always carried, had been left behind. He immediately turned back. As his carriage drew up at the presbytery he heard a strange low hubbub from within. His curiosity led him to peep through the door of the dining-room, and there, sad to tell, the abstainers of an hour ago, with their waistcoats unbuttoned and their napkins tucked into their collars, were emptying their glasses with gusto as they partook of a second lunch—a bean-feast!

The Cardinal showed a great affection for La Boulaie. Whenever he could find the time, he liked to go there—'to get a rest from everything'. This year it was with a special pleasure that he looked forward to his visit, for he

wanted to see Gaston again before leaving for the Council which was about to meet to discuss the Infallibility of the Pope.

The journey was generally made in a swaying berline: the Cardinal would jokingly observe that you had to have your sea-legs before you could meditate a journey in it. A footman sat beside the coachman on the box. On top of the berline, covering the entire roof, lay a flat trunk in which the pontifical vestments could be carried without hurt. A curiously shaped boot at the rear accommodated the holy vessels, certain of which the Cardinal always took with him. And finally, at the extreme end of the carriage—the poop—was a little flap-seat for a groom.

The horses were two fine strong mares, with cockades of black-and-red-striped silk.

This carriage was now progressing through the warm but agreeably misty autumn air. It had been Monseigneur de Bonnechese's intention to pay a visit to the Comte de Maistre at Beaumesnil, but he suddenly decided to make a detour and stop at the La Bare château for a while. He was reading his breviary, while his grand-vicaire dozed at his side. They had just climbed a hill and the mares were settling back into their normal steady pace, when the two men on the box noticed in the fields to their left a great cloud of dust. A rider, an odd-looking rider, black-and-white like a magpie, concealing his sombre dress beneath a white smock, was galloping full speed over the stubble. The upper part of his body could be scarcely seen, for he was crouched forward over the horse's neck. Was he urging on his mount or trying to hold it back? They would soon know, for he was coming towards them at a terrific speed, his horse whinnying as he came. 'By gad!' muttered the coachman, 'we're in for trouble. It's a stallion!' And what a stallion! The mares quivered their immediate response.

The rider was trying to hold back his mount, which fought to reach the berline. The outcome of the struggle

was by no means a certain victory for the stallion, for on his back raged a fearless horseman who knew all there was to be known, and more besides. With all his strength and all his skill he was holding back the amorous brute. The man's white teeth were bared, as if in the last event he would plunge them into his mount! The mares came to a standstill. The tall rider succeeded in pulling the stallion up, so that he swung round in a half circle, plunged back once more, and once again struggled to get to them, but at length lost ground. . . .

'What is it?' asked the Cardinal, looking over his glasses. The grand-vicaire awoke to the full terror of the situation and began to cry out.

'Oh dear, dear! Help! Help! Help!'

'Be quiet!' snapped Monseigneur.

Be quiet! The peaceable canon, in horror, cried out all the louder.

'Help! Help! O God, preserve us! Holy Mary——'

'No,' said the Cardinal, 'not that! Will you be quiet!' (But the canon's cries only increased.) 'You'll only make matters worse, you fool!'

An immediate silence was restored. The Cardinal put his head out of the window.

'What a horse! And what a rider!'

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And now he was privileged to witness a more dangerous, a more brilliant fantasia than was ever seen from Emir's tent! The stallion reared and was checked, as if for some *haute-école* exercise. In the terrible strength of his frenzy he beat the air with his forelegs, drummed with his hoofs, threw up his hind quarters, fell again, snorting and blowing, only to rear once more, and stagger back and back. And all this, on the bank that rose so steeply from the road that he could have jumped straight over the coach. . . .

'What a horseman! What a wonderful horseman!' His Eminence sighed in admiration. 'Why . . . it looks

like . . . surely it's a priest!' (Now, for the first time, he noticed the rider's cassock.) 'Monsieur'—in boyish excitement the Cardinal shook his grand-vicaire—'who's this priest? Don't we know him?'

The grand-vicaire peeped out timidly.

'Oh!'

The horse's hoofs gleamed twelve feet up in the air.

'It's . . . it's the abbé de La Bare!'

'H'm,' muttered the Cardinal. 'So Amélien wasn't so far out!'

Gaston was winning the contest; but the intervention of a third party threatened to spoil everything. The footman, a brave peasant lad and anxious to help, ran to the stallion's head and made to catch hold of the reins. Sacrilege! while the rider still held them!

'Get away, man!'

The footman slipped aside just in time to avoid a blow with the whip.

The Cardinal was shocked. 'This is inadmissible!' he groaned, to himself.

A voice rang out, panting from the struggle.

'Get on! Whip them on!'

'Yes, whip them on!' Monseigneur commanded.

It was impossible. The mares stood paralysed, sinking into the mud of the road.

Gaston was still gaining. He pulled the stallion away towards an orchard. A few men, who seemed to have sprung up out of the earth, stood ready a good distance off. Gaston now had his mount almost seated on the ground, while the stiffened forelegs still pawed the air, the eyes blazed madly, the mouth ran with foam, and the ears were flattened, invisible. And then, quicker than eye could see, one red hand took the reins near the bit, the other twisted the rest into a loop, and with a lightning movement the rider jumped to the ground and encircled the horse's nostrils and lower jaw with a running knot. And now the abbé was pulling at the stallion, suffocating

him. The men rushed up. The horse's breath came panting in great snorts. . . .

It was only then that Gaston recognized the berline. The unhappy youngster flung up his arms in terrible consternation. He rushed towards the coach, clearing the slope at a jump, and fell on his knees in the wet dust.

'Forgive me, Eminence; forgive me. . . .'

'Get in,' commanded the Cardinal; and to the coachman, 'Try the whip again.'

The poor lad lowered himself on to the occasional seat. His eyes were blinking. Painfully he got his breath back and his dry throat moistened once more. A twitching convulsed his cheeks. His open cassock revealed the fine lace frills of the shirts which were his at La Bare, and the perfume of them warred violently with the smell of the horse.

The Cardinal studied him.

'Well, my friend,' he said at last, 'Virgil's *Studiosus Equorum* would apply now—if ever. What do you think, Monsieur le Grand-Vicaire?'

The grand-vicaire only showed the whites of his eyes. That 'fool!' that the Cardinal had flung at him just now stuck in his mind. Take sides? Never! You could never tell, with the Cardinal, especially when it concerned the son of the Marquis de La Bare, his friend. Prudence!

'The son of the Marquis de La Bare'—Gaston did not suggest it now. His hands were bleeding from innumerable scratches, and he hid them between his knees. His lips trembled.

'It is quite inadmissible,' pronounced the Cardinal. 'You will have to choose between your spurs and the biretta, my son, between your stallions and your cassock. . . .'

'Your Eminence!' cried the young man, throwing himself forward, glimpsing, in his weariness and his dismay, the full meaning of this last sacrifice that he must make. . . .

'No more horses, my son; no more horses. But—m'm . . . just tell me—what was the name of that operation you performed on his mouth?'

'A "Mexican knot", Eminence,' Gaston replied, his eyes blinking still.

Sitting there, his long legs bent and his knees high, he seemed suddenly to have become very small. His body was upright—stiff, as if he was struggling against some desolation which threatened to cast him utterly down. The Cardinal eyed him searchingly. The mares were trotting now. Over there in the depths of the plain, the peasants were taking the stallion back. Their rough shouts could be heard even here, in the padded silence of the coach. . . .

'No, no more horses,' Monseigneur went on, fighting down his pity; 'the Levite must carry with him everywhere the atmosphere of the temple.' And this time, firmly, implacably, he pronounced: 'That's the end of your riding isn't it?'

Like an automaton, Gaston nodded his acquiescence, several times. He could not say a word. He looked for his handkerchief but did not find it. He wiped his eyes and his forehead with the back of his hand and his sleeve, like a whipped child.

Monseigneur drove him as far as the gates of the château. He had now decided not to stop there himself, but to go on to Beaumesnil straight away. Had his courage faltered? Was he aware of the sorrow that Gaston's sorrow would cause at La Bare? As they parted, the young seminarist knelt to kiss his ring, but the Cardinal raised him, putting his fine, eloquent lips to those ill-shaven cheeks, soiled with dust and sweat. The boy was beaten. He looked up at the Cardinal with despair in his eyes.

'Courage, my son! Offer that—as a sacrifice, my child. I will pray for you to Saint George, the martyr, Prince of Cappadocia, and patron of horsemen. . . . Embrace me

and be strong. Go now, and think of the ineffable purity of that Kingdom. . . .’

The abbé left him. The coachman began to turn the horses.

‘Wait!’ said the prelate.

His eyes followed the youngster as he strode clumsily up the avenue in his heavy boots.

‘Now you can drive on.’

At last Gaston reached the château. A groom was walking a saddled horse. He recognized it immediately as belonging to the young Comte Dauger, a friend of his, a friend of Manfred’s particularly. He was, after Gaston, perhaps the best rider in the county. The young priest thoughtfully raised his head, and, going round to the side of the house, saw Manfred and the visitor making for the stables. He joined them there.

The two young men were astonished.

‘What a state you’re in!’

‘I took Regulus,’ said Gaston.

After one more glance at his tortured face, they turned away, courteously tactful, towards the horses.

Arrogant, looking up at his master from his box, laughed with his rosy lips. Gently Gaston stroked his cheeks. Then he pressed his mouth to the horse’s nostrils in a kiss. The two young men whose lives were still before them were admiring the golden thoroughbred. And the man who was giving up his life turned to them.

‘D’you want Arrogant, Aldonce?’

‘What?’

‘Would you like Arrogant? I’m not doing any more riding. Just give me twopence . . . twopence,” he repeated, very softly, going towards the door. ‘Give it to Manfred . . . and take him away . . . I . . .’

He was going to the right, towards the chapel. Aghast, the other two stared after him. Gaston’s head was bowed as he walked through the beautiful autumn sunlight, his unsteady shadow at his side. At the door of the chapel he

came to a standstill for a second, as if he had changed his mind. His arms hung limp. Then he opened the door: Manfred noticed that his shadow, long and narrow in the cassock, was outlined on the white-washed wall like the shadow of a dead and shattered tree.

Manfred did not protest against the gift. Between the two brothers there existed no longer the affection of yesterday. Had Manfred met with a certain hardness in his younger brother? At all events, he made no effort to understand him: the young priest was beyond his understanding. He could only admire him, pity him, and then sadly shrug his shoulders. If the manner in which he spoke to Gaston was gentle and courteous now, he seemed more distant from him than in the old days when he had bullied him affectionately.

When he next met his father, he told him of Gaston's decision. 'So it's true, then?' replied the Marquis, with a frown. 'Perhaps that'll make him change his mind. He certainly needed a bit of riding, for his health. . . .'

Unlike her menfolk, Madame de La Bare could not realize the immensity of the sacrifice. She had always been a little amused by the whole subject of horses. But the blow was a terrible one for Gaston. Horses and prayer had been the only real loves in his life. He had never played games; he had never hunted or shot; he had never been interested in food or drink. And he had never foreseen that such a renunciation could possibly be required of him: all the priests he had known went about on horseback. At Paris the Abbé Bertin rode behind the Empress's carriage in the Bois. So, unconsciously, he felt the added bitterness of a personal grievance. 'It's too hard, too hard!' His own lips framed those words with which so often men rejected the priests and went their own way. He realized that for him riding remained the only way of keeping up his strength: it could alone combat that intellectual despair which weighed so heavily upon him. If his body were worn out as he came back from a ride, his soul would be refreshed and his spirit calmer.

A long while later, he left the chapel, and no one mentioned his new decision. The Marquis and Manfred were on the terrace. It was with something like anger that Gaston learned that Aldonce had left without taking Arrogant. His hands twisted nervously.

'I'll go over this evening,' said Manfred. 'Don't worry. I'll take him.'

'Would you go as soon as you can, please, Manfred? I'm going for a bit of a walk. Thanks.'

It was late at night before he returned. The next day, he announced his intention of going over to Tainchebraye to see to things there.

'You're not selling it all up?' exclaimed the Marquis.

'No, but I think I'll have to cut down the number of mares we take, so that there'll be no need to engage any more men.'

Gaston did not say, 'Because Jeannet and O'Bearn are getting old'—they were the same age as his father. He went off in a little trap, driving himself as far as the end of the avenue, where he asked his man to take the reins.

The groom eyed him with an almost baleful expression, in which respect, anger, and scorn too were all mingled. Gaston, leaving the driver's seat, moved to the right, holding out reins and whip. He did not speak again. The man purposely let the reins go slack. Not for some time did Gaston touch his wrist in silent correction. 'Keep your elbows bent when driving a young horse.' But still he said nothing.

Gaston had been to Tainchebraye at the beginning of September, to find Aimée away nursing an old relative. When he appeared at the château now, O'Bearn ran up and innocently asked if Monsieur were not feeling well. 'Monsieur,' because a seminarist could not be addressed as 'Monsieur le Comte', and the man did not wish to say, 'Monsieur l'abbé'. Gaston asked after Mademoiselle Aimée.

'She's down there,' came the groom's reply.

Gaston took the road to the village. Absorbed as he was in his own thoughts, his whole being was awake to the beauty around him. It had rained during the night, and now the light was diffused magnificently into the distant mist. Autumn came more quickly here than at La Bare, because Tainchebraye stood on higher ground. The ponds, which were soon to be drained, were now full, redoubling the golden splendour of the trees. A migrating band of pigeons had come to rest in the woods on their way south. Birds sprang up from every side, with their swift flight, with that strange, instinctive swiftness, speeding for sheer delight in speed, as if they too must gallop ever onwards! Like darting blue arrows, they traced pastel-coloured arabesques on the chrome mass of leaves.

The very sounds here had a different quality: a myriad echoes went to their making, echoes thrown back from the sonorous hills into the little valleys. The air was not vibrant here, as in Ouche, where each sound quivered endlessly, wave upon wave, to be stilled only by the dome of heaven and the subterranean hollows dug in the clay. Triumphant everywhere here was the song of the springs, chief among them the fountain Roger had made, where the water gushed straight up and fell curving down like a rod and line.

Gaston walked on painfully, panting a little, for he was unused to hills, and still hindered, although he had worn it for a year now, by the flapping skirts of his cassock and his monk shoes. After six weeks of riding everywhere, he found walking irksome.

Écouves lay hidden in a warm mist. In front of him rose a hill, its round curve intensified by the banked ditch which encircled it. It was crowned by a group of lopped trees, like women in green furs and wide-brimmed hats. There was something of Brittany here.

To Gaston the view, for all the sunlight, was mournful,

and offered no hope. Perhaps even because of the sunlight. A grey landscape would have seemed less melancholy.

'Down there'—O'Bearn's phrase—meant in the cemetery of the little hidden village. Gaston reached it to find Aimée coming towards him between the crosses and the wreaths. She clasped her hands and her breast heaved a little. Ah yes!—the cassock! Gaston shrugged his shoulders, and in a voice that sounded natural enough:

'Don't be afraid,' he said. Aimée, like Jacqueline, would not laugh. . . . 'Wait for me, Aimée, I must go back to-night.' Gaston knew that with her instinctive tact she would leave him alone with his uncle.

There lay the great tombstone. Raising the skirt of his cassock, he knelt down, and felt a strange sweet sensation as his knees sank into the grass. The last Tainchebraye roses had just been placed there, in silver vases—rich and ugly vases, Aimée's choice. The slanting rays of the sun fell on the stone so that, to the eyes of the kneeling Gaston the deep-cut inscription, still running with water, shone like diamond lettering.

Perhaps his feeling for the man who lay there was changed, now that he knew him better, but it was no less tender. Had he been right or wrong? How could he tell? Who can learn the despair and the heavy secrets in the soul of a passionate man? Yes, he had lived for love; but with what suffering and what martyrdom, deepening always and conquered every hour! Others might sin after the same fashion, without that terrible excuse which he bore beneath his mask; the man rejected by the world, exiled from ordinary life, a pariah in his wounds; he who had never wished to impose upon a wife the constant horror of his mutilation, who would not accept a whole lifetime as alms.

Stories had come to Gaston's ears, stories which branded Aimée as a child of the most heinous origin; and this was

what that wounded man had made of her—that proud creature, all dignity and reserve. She had kept the house full of flowers, and now she saw that his grave was never without them.

Gaston communed for a long time with Roger, with his soul and with his heart. On the point of abandoning Tainchebraye, he explained his sorrowful reasons and rendered his accounts to the giver: told him of his poor, frail hopes, his sacrifice. And in his deep consciousness of the dead man's presence, and his regard for his feelings, he did not even let the thought occur to him that if he was offering himself out of reparation, the gentleman of love had played his part too in that resolve.

The letters glittered diamond no longer. The sun was sinking behind the walls, and now the titles, rank and decorations were grey-black against the clear stone as on the funeral card. The sun's rays only lit up now the roofs of the houses and the red chimneys. Gaston looked around. Nobody was to be seen. He was alone, hidden among the crosses. He opened the big knife he carried at the seminary—the peasant knife that he used for his meals—and began to dig. Near him waited a little packet wrapped in tissue paper. He dug a slanting hole that went down under the stone, and when he had kissed the parcel as he had kissed Arrogant, he buried it there. Then carefully he filled the cavity he had scooped out and put back the sod of turf in its place.

He had given his golden spurs into Tainchebraye's care.

On his return he told Aimée that he could no longer manage Tainchebraye properly, for it needed a man ready to jump on horseback at any moment. His father was growing old and tired, and so he had thought of giving the stud and the château to his brother. Not that he had any legal right to dispose of the Tainchebraye property. The Marquis remained his trustee until he was twenty-

one. But he knew his father's generosity too well to doubt but that he would approve without even discussing the matter.

'The château will go to Manfred one day . . . so he may as well begin——'

'Have you quite decided?' she asked numbly.

'Yes,' he said, and his voice was equally toneless, as if one last anxiety troubled him. . . .

'Very well . . . but you musn't mind, Monsieur Gaston . . . if I leave Tainchebraye too.'

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TERRIBLE YEAR

WE are caught unawares: the year that is upon us, the twelve months from the autumn of '69 and that of '70—ought to rank as one of the most outstanding in the history of the modern world. With it ended a cycle of almost two thousand years, in which an attempt had been made to impose upon the nations an authority superior to mere force. It is the year that saw the fall of Papal Rome, and the last Council, which sat for nine months, a Council convened to set a seal on the work, to crown that supreme authority. But men's passions intervened.

Monseigneur de Bonnechose, who expected to be away for a long time, paid his farewell visits. He did not go so far as to predict that this Council would be another Council of Trente, taking eight years to reform the Catholic code, but he was well aware of the extreme complexity of the situation. While the country people lived on in their old simple style, the transformation of the world was accelerating with dizzy speed. The sufferings of Pius IX roused the sympathy of all, though the papal zouaves were recruited mainly from Brittany and Le Mans. The Normans were no longer anxious to go to Italy—perhaps because their families were not so big as they had been; perhaps, also, because they found it difficult to accept the papal claims. The famous promulgation of Papal Infallibility had astounded every one.

Cardinal de Bonnechose supported it, but without any great enthusiasm. His conviction was only strong while he was on Roman soil and while the Council lasted. He foresaw some resistance from his bishops. . . . The bishops themselves, of course, were all ready to pronounce their

'placet', but in their contact with the souls and the minds of their flock they could not but fail to be conscious of the difficulties which the faithful would find in the way of acceptance.

This resistance was amazing! Old women of the greatest piety have declared that this was the most painful period in their lives as Christians. If the Terrible Year had not brought its anguish, its despair, and with this the feeling that it was a divine punishment, the new dogma, it seems, might have provoked something like schismatic revolt.

The reasons for this are none too clear. To put the question in a simple, more material form, to diminish its extent in order to examine it at closer quarters, why should the president of an association, endowed personally with unlimited power, not retain the right to modify the statutes?

The world lived through an exceptional, trance-like period. For three centuries there had been no Councils, and now here was a reunion in far-off Rome, whose repercussions, thanks to modern means of communication, were daily and universal. The debates were passionately followed; parties formed, waxed, and waned. Geographically the resistance began towards the south of France and sped swiftly as an arrow to the extreme north, embracing the east (for instance, there was that schism of the 'Old Catholics' in Germany and Switzerland), and roused Normandy too. And there were Belgians who disgorged fire and flame as hotly as any. Forgotten the excitement caused by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, forgotten that priest who, striking Mgr. Sibour dead, cried, 'Down with the Goddess!' The storm then was as nothing compared with this.

Monseigneur attributed the localized character of the opposition to an unconscious element of Protestantism in these districts, which in his view affected even the purest Catholics—an example of the influence of environment. The strange part of it was that other religions besides that of Roman Catholicism had awaited the decision with an

equal impatience. The Church of England, which had shown some slight leaning towards Rome, now saw all hope of any alliance wrecked. The Lutherans were triumphant, seeing their ways justified. The Orthodox Church finally broke away.

The Jansenism of Normandy had left the Cardinal with little support, and he was worried. Against him he found Cardinal Mathieu, the Primate of Gaul. They were good friends, and furnished an example of the attraction of opposites: the lean and stately seigneur contrasting strongly with the burly peasant; the subtle but steadfast Bonnechose, and the blunt but inwardly vacillating Mathieu. The intellectual oscillations of the Council discouraged even the firmest minds. 'A tossing vessel, and everybody on board is seasick,' wrote the Cardinal of Rouen.

But the last hours of Rome were of a splendour beyond compare: six hundred bishops, without counting the prelates! The whole ecclesiastical world and its followers was there. Endless processions encumbered the city. The winter was less rigorous than that which was to follow . . . pomp filled the streets, ecclesiastical pomp, which foregoes not one jot of its traditional trappings. The Pope received signs of filial affection from all over the globe. Never had the Roman world seemed more solid, more eternal. The city became verily, for nine months, the centre of civilization, and its normal population was doubled.

And during this glorious period what became of the poor little shivering seminarists in a more northerly latitude? The controversies of the professors made their refectory walls shake, and the echoes of their endless discussions reached the pupils. And one tall lad faltered. How complicated it was! How many things there were to learn and to decide between! . . . Sometimes discouragement seized him; it would be so simple if to love were enough! Even the others seemed less assured

as they went up to stretch themselves out between the damp sheets, after an attempt to eat in the musty refectory; they climbed the dank, sweating staircase in meagre files, while the curfew rang out from the cathedral tower of Séez, whose enormous scaffolding could be seen from the dormitory. . . . The Council . . . the bishops. . . .

At last, on the 13th July 1870, 451 out of 600 voted their approval. On the 16th the papal apotheosis and victory were complete. But on the same day came the declaration of the Franco-Prussian war. An astounding coincidence. On the very day, at the very instant, when the Pope was in a position to affirm his spiritual domination, his temporal power crumbled. The war put an end to the defence of Rome: the French troops that had come to her aid would be withdrawn, and concessions could no longer continue to assure the all-important neutrality of Piedmont. Rome was basely abandoned to her fate. France had forsaken the Pope.

The clock was put back; Christianity was forgotten.

The war of 1870 was a mobile war: one is even tempted to use the phrase 'a real war', such as one can only imagine by summoning up pictures of the first days of August, 1914, and projecting them over ten long months. There was the same increasing anxiety, the same dread of an inexorable advance. Within its brief span the war of 1870 contained the full horror of the Great War. And there were no allies—the heart's last hope; there was nothing to oppose the invasion.

In the countryside the 4th of September passed almost unnoticed, coming as it did just after the terrible shock of surprise, the dramatic news whose effect we can hardly now conceive: 'The Emperor taken prisoner!' The disaster itself overshadowed its political consequences. The proclamation of the Republic seemed only a temporary expedient: a dyke piled up to stem the onrush of the waters. Poitiers, Pavia, Sedan! those three most

fatal days in French history: Sedan the gravest of them all, for with Sedan the armies of France were no more.

The invasion of Normandy was a deflection from the main line of attack and was, on the whole, fairly chivalrous. The city of Rouen gave proof of its nobility. When Mayor Nétien was called upon to arrange the triumphal entry of the King of Prussia, he replied: 'Your master is a soldier. I will see that he finds a billet.' Monseigneur de Bonnechose was very successful in his handling of General von Manteuffel: an example of diplomacy which was followed throughout the district by the representatives of great families, who did the best they could for the peasants.

With few exceptions the German officers were aristocrats, especially those of the reserve and the army of occupation, and they were sensitive to public opinion—but then, with victory so complete, how easy it was to be generous!

At La Bare, Manfred had joined up after the first reverses. According to his father, he was being foolish; he was disregarding tradition. God had marked the end of the orgy. The Marquis even went so far as to declare that the situation would soon be similar to that of 1814, and that unfortunately France was greater in defeat than in victory. With or without Manfred, France would find her feet . . . and after he had said all this, it appeared that he had prepared a belt full of gold pieces for his eldest son a full fortnight before.

'After all,' he muttered, in conclusion, 'one's got the right to any sort of foolery when it's a question of honour.'

Gaston was helping tend the wounded at the château de Rieusses, in one of the hospitals which rapidly sprang up all over the country. His principal had sent him there when the seminary closed down. He was only a few miles now from La Bare. As the first troops had marched off every one had known a drunken excitement. And even the most peaceable Latinists at the seminary had waved

their birettas, shouting, 'À Berlin!' The Marquis himself had been on the point of betraying all his past. 'I cleared out,' he told Gaston. 'Another ten minutes and I'd have been shouting, "Vive l'Empereur!" You see, "Vive la France" is a bit too vague. But cry, "Vive le Roi!" and at least it gives you something more than just a map to think of!' Gaston himself was deeply moved, as was evident in his clenched fists and his blanched face. But he remained calm. His enthusiasms of old seemed to have left him for ever.

Almost immediately the dreadful news had followed. The beautiful weather of that deathly month of August saw armies of more and more men marching to defeat and disaster, beneath the triumphal sun. A terrible aggravation, for these splendid days threw their pitiless light on the panic-stricken, retreating troops, shaming the vanquished and exalting their victors. And old cults sprang to the memory—cults in which the gods were devouring gods, crushing mankind underfoot. The harvest fields caught fire, to finish off the wounded to whom they should have given sanctuary. Flames from heaven seemed to have doomed the burning towns.

And now, with the same abnormal violence, came the winter. La Bare was right. God was abandoning France as France had abandoned the Pope. Its people were paying for treason and sin.

Ah! The many prayers, the vain defeated prayers that were lost as battles were lost!

Cardinal Bonnechose used all his resources to try to ease the burden of defeat. Since twenty million was demanded of the ruined *département*, he decided to appeal to Bismarck himself. The Cardinal was seventy years old, and in this terrible weather the journey to Paris seemed more impracticable than ever. But he went, taking with him only a small suitcase and a little priest-secretary to carry it and its contents, the great scarlet robes, the cappa magna folded as small as possible, and

the hat. Going by way of Poissy, they reached Saint-Germain in a public conveyance, where the company and the conversation on this drunken Sunday was more suited to a Boule de Suif. The Cardinal was unperturbed. He had that consciousness of self which men call pride—enviously, for it is the mark of a noble soul. From Versailles, he wrote to the all-powerful Bismarck with the same assurance as if he had come thus far in his own carriage. The little secretary, whose name—'Ouf'—raises a smile, was by this time inclined to lose faith in his Cardinal. But Monseigneur, signing 'Henri de Bonnechose, Cardinal Archbishop of Rouen,' remained as dignified as ever.

An hour later, Ouf returned, wide-eyed, carrying an enormous German envelope. The Chancellor had replied without a moment's delay, and what a reply! 'If the hour were not so late, the Count himself would come to pay his respects to His Eminence, but he did not wish to disturb the community' (the prelate was lodging at the seminary). An audience was arranged for the morrow.

When the Cardinal's ceremonial robes were unpacked, Ouf cried out in dismay at their crumpled state, so flat-irons were propped up in front of the meagre fire, and both of them began to press the long robes, the Cardinal testing the heat of the irons by raising them to his cheeks—a tip he had gathered from the maids at Boulaie. He must not scorch his fine purple!

The hour came at last. All that could be obtained in the way of a conveyance was a decrepit hackney cab with a cheery driver wearing a white cardboard *blum* ('derby') over his red ear.

And into this elegant carriage stepped the Archbishop in his scarlet cape. There was a painful moment of indecision before the gates. Should they get out or wait for them to open? Get out, thought Ouf. Wait, decided Bonnechose. And then the gates were flung wide, and every step of the approach was adorned with valets in full livery, awaiting the primate! 'Phew!' muttered

the cabby to himself, and he was not the only one to grow a little pale. The Cardinal for once almost lost his head. An immense figure of a man with a bronze beard and little pig's eyes flew down the steps, advanced to the cab, and held out his forearm bent, in courtly fashion, to help the Cardinal alight. 'Thank you, my friend,' said Bonnechose. But this 'major-domo' accompanied him all the way to the drawing-room and sat down. 'Mon Dieu!' murmured the Norman, 'it's Monsieur de Bismarck himself!' But the Prussian seemed to have noticed nothing: he felt pity for this intrepid old man.

And in three days the Cardinal obtained not only this long interview but an audience with the Kaiser himself, who, though suffering from lumbago, got up for him; another audience with the Crown Prince, and one with the Minister of War. The Grand Duke of Baden was the first to call on the Archbishop, while Bismarck received him a second time. Not only was the levy reduced by two-thirds, and never really raised, but the bellicose old man took up the cause of Pius IX and badgered the Lutherans so heartily that the Germans ended by looking upon themselves as the champions of the Papacy.

The occupation of Normandy soon became a matter of easy-going routine. In a fortnight the worst was over. The Prussians settled down and the Normans accepted their presence. At Rieusses, a platoon of Uhlans had been installed in the servants' quarters, and a number of staff-officers in the drawing-rooms: cavalry officers past their first youth, who thought more of writing letters home than of mapping out operations.

Gaston did not see much of La Bare. It had escaped requisitions to such a conspicuous extent that the whole neighbourhood was astonished. The Marquis seemed very much at his ease with the invaders—for the most part country squires like himself. On the third day after their arrival, when mutual liking had begun to spring up

between them and courtesy implied no obsequiousness, he showed the commandant letters which Prussian officers had written to thank his uncle for the hospitality they had received in 1814. He displayed also a sheaf of army documents which had been kept since their departure. The Marquis persisted in the vain hope that the King would return. Manfred wrote regularly: he was enjoying himself at the war, and declared that he had been given first-rate horses. They had no fears for him now, and in any case, the fighting was almost over.

At Rieusses the Germans showed an immediate regard for the seminarist. With their Teutonic gravity they found it very fitting that a young man of his station should devote himself to religion. But their respect turned to wide-eyed admiration when the priest unconsciously gave proof of his profound knowledge of horses. Horses are international, and Gaston, who showed the same devotion to wounded German soldiers as to French, undertook to look after the varied sorts and conditions of horses that filled the paddock. The mixture of breeds made them an interesting collection. The majority had been captured, the rest requisitioned. The officers took their choice. In them Gaston could read the history of this terrible war—in their appearance, their build and their manners. Some were southerners, light horses from the chasseurs or the hussars. Others, very close to the Arab breed, must have come from General Bourbaki's African troops. The big Normans had belonged to the Guards—at Sedan! Many of them were badly galled and nearly broken-winded, but Gaston took charge of them all with great success. As soon as he entered the paddock all these poor animals would run up to him, and his tender Franciscan's heart was touched. He fondled them as they surged round him in their affection, and sometimes he would pause, possessed by the thought that those men who had ridden them, in all the splendour of robust health, might now be shapeless corpses. He was caring for orphans.

All the cavalrymen quartered here were full of admiration for a magnificent and powerful charger which the commandant had reserved for his own use: a great bay, built for the utmost strength and grace, which shone like steel. Broad-shouldered, strong-backed, yet with the lines of a race-horse, he was the perfect mount for the dragoon or the rider-to-hounds, and there wasn't a scratch on him: he might have just stepped out of a travelling-box.

'No,' decided Gaston. 'No, commandant, you'll never convince me that he's a Pomeranian. His shoulders are too fine, his cheek-bone too well defined. I'm not denying that your breeders have produced some fine types, by crossing with English strains. Did you know, by the way, that it was a Prussian family, the Freudenfelds, who supplied Napoleon I with his horses? Although as General Bonaparte he bought at Caen. . . . No, this is a hunter, an Irish thoroughbred, or I know nothing about it.'

He thought of O'Bearn, who would have known at once, but the Tainchebraye horses were at Jersey, out of harm's way.

Gaston made a special friend of this great bay.

'And to think that they want to annex you too, old fellow!'

In the pocket of his cassock he always carried some special tit-bit for him, and even succeeded in persuading the commandant to use only a smooth bit. Ten days later the German officer was proposing that Gaston should ride him.

'If you want to go out, Monsieur l'Abbé, all the horses here are at your service—including your special friend.'

'I've given up riding. . . .'

But if he happened to see a soldier maltreating his horse or sitting him badly, Gaston could not refrain from reproaching him in his fine German. Afterwards, he would reproach himself.

Life was proving very easily endurable for every one, when there came the tragic defence of Bernay. The brave

little town thought it the most natural thing in the world that its National Guard should resist the occupation. There were a few stray infantrymen in the town, and, in addition, so the Prussians alleged (without contradiction from the French), a company of volunteers. The accounts of witnesses permit of no doubts on the matter.

One cannot but honour such glorious stupidity! An enormous army, a tide of men, was rolling over the whole north-west. Bernay, a mere grain of sand, would be swept up and carried away, but obstinacy will never abdicate. It is a very human quality.

The resistance took the form of an ambush. The Prussian troops were peacefully making their way from Broglie to Bernay along the broad, straight road which follows an ancient Roman way, when a volley of rifle-fire rang out, and ill-luck would have it that two most exalted personages were hit: the young Count Hirsch, aide-de-camp to the Grand Duke of Mecklembourg, and Prince Württemberg. All lives, we know, are worth the same price, but for Bernay the importance of these two led to the most terrible of consequences. Vengeance would be very stern. Prince Württemberg was taken back to Germany. It appears that through Marie Antoinette he was related to Louis XVI. At all events he died upon the same day as that monarch—a twenty-first of January.

Gaston was in the very act of saying Vespers for the Dead for the King's soul when the first canon-shot thundered out. He rushed out to see what was happening. The Germans were beside themselves with rage. They blamed the cursed volunteers for the whole affair, and vowed to punish them.

And now, war stamped down upon this peaceful countryside, war as they had never known it since the Ligue, for Chouannerie here had amounted to nothing more than a few skirmishes. But this was war in earnest, with massed troops. There were long processions of wounded men, with fresh wounds, wounds full of dirt

and mud that the hospitals of the interior had never before had to deal with. Furious gallops of artillery passed by. Broglie was packed with troops waiting the word to march. The thunder of canon came close at hand, as if from the neighbouring houses or the park itself. The battle of 11th January, the battle of Le Mans, had resounded even here, as if the fighting were only five leagues off.

The entire district took up arms. Men slept in their boots and their clothes. German patrols were everywhere. Gaston suffered deeply. The thought of fighting quickened his pulse: he blushed for his peaceable occupations. All the warriors in his ancestry stirred in him. Had he not had his work tending the sick—ten times as many now, and in a tragic plight, could he have resisted the call that sounded within him? While washing a wound, he would stop as some louder canon-shot shook the window-panes. He seemed to be caught up in some immense upheaval where dignity, courtesy, nothing counted any longer. The officers became brutal again, and for the first time Gaston understood what racial hatred meant.

Their fixed idea about the volunteers tormented the Germans. Four were betrayed to them in particularly infamous circumstances, by a local prostitute. She apparently made use of a little boy, almost a baby, an innocent, who for a penny went off to repeat her fatal information to the Prussians. The four men were condemned to death. In the silence of dawn the countryside waited, hushed and tense, for the volley from the firing squad to rip through the morning calm.

Then three children were shot while collecting sticks in the forest. They took to their heels at the approach of a company of soldiers, who fired in the direction of the noise.

Two of them were brothers, sons of a friendly peasant household, and Gaston went to watch by them. The cottage was on the side of the road, and all night long the German troops marched by, knocking at the door from

time to time, whenever the light at this unusual hour seemed suspicious to them. Once a sergeant came to investigate, a great bearded giant of a man. In the end, in spite of the intense cold, the peasant left the door open, and the troops defiled before the two little white coffins surrounded by candles, 'as if they were asking forgiveness', as the old steward of Renneville said afterwards. It was as a sequel to these reprisals that an officer was brutally murdered in the forest of Broglie. During this terrible period, a mere nothing would have been sufficient to rouse the peasants to arms, to stir them to the rediscovery of their violent and despairing hearts—their 'Gautiers' hearts (such was the name given to the men of Ouche who revolted under the Ligue).

Gaston returned to Rieusses in the morning in a state of tense, rebellious hatred which made him a little afraid. Could he bring himself to nurse these Prussians any longer? The very sight of them in the distance, those heavy fellows in their soft boots and their little gaily beribboned berets, roused a physical repulsion in him. Oh, for a chance of doing them harm, a chance of humiliating them, of seeing them crushed in their turn. . . .

It was the 24th of January. In front of the château the great bay horse stood ready for the commandant. Gaston paused to stroke his head, for he had little desire to join that enemy world indoors. The commandant, wrapped in furs against the cold, was leaving now . . . when there arrived a courier, with an air so maliciously jubilant that it struck the Frenchman like a personal affront. What now? What terrible news was this red-faced brute bringing? Gaston strained his ears. And now—now! half a minute determined the course of his life more than ten years of reflection had ever done. The Prussians had discovered the retreat of a band of volunteers. The wood and the place—he named them—were quite familiar to Gaston. The Uhlans were to join up with two other cavalry companies and take them by surprise.

Poor devils! Gaston saw the worn-out men—the onrush of the Prussians—the massacre. He felt the full horror of their plight as if it were his own, and was dominated by one of those sudden impulses which in the past had so often swayed him, and from which even two years at the seminary had failed to make him quite immune. He must go to them and warn them! The horse was waiting. . . . Here was the one case in which the Cardinal's ban did not hold: the Cardinal himself would have set the example. Save these Frenchmen, save this handful of heroes! Tear them out of these savage, victorious jaws! For behind the timid priestling lived the child of a venturesome race. . . .

The commandant came out on to the steps in time to see a great black bird, six feet in length, taking off in flight; a tall black puppet, which flew into the air with legs apart and fell squarely into the saddle, sent the astonished orderly reeling back from a blow in the face, and rode off! Springing forward like one being, horse and priest fled, with a clatter of hoofs, in immediate and violent accord—an explosion!

Open-mouthed, speechless for some seconds, the German officer stared after the furious charge . . . and understood. The priest had heard. He was off to the rescue. And now he howled the alarm and brought his men running. He pointed to the galloping figure, and gave his orders. Follow him; even if they could not catch him, follow him all the same. He would lead them to the volunteers!

What a horse! Perched forward to free the hind quarters from his weight, Gaston rejoiced to find the stirrups short, for this enabled him to hold the precarious American seat which a few horsemen were beginning to adopt for galloping. To reach the forest even only five minutes ahead of his pursuers was to win the day. He was at home among the trees, while the Prussians would have to find a guide. The volunteers had chosen their

lair well. Before he was at the end of the drive Gaston tasted joy once more. 'Yes, Eminence, I did right. You yourself would have ordered me to. . . .' And like a rigorist on his liberation from penance, he rejoiced all the deeper in his liberty. A thrill ran through him as he felt the warmth of the horse in his legs. It was more than fifteen months since he had been in the saddle: it might have been only yesterday. 'I shall suffer for it to-morrow. But to-morrow isn't to-day!'

As he turned out of the drive he slackened speed. He had at least a clear ten minutes' start, and even without that none of those poor horses from the château could have kept up with him. The young priest fell into a hunting gallop and smiled as he heard the bells. The bells? The church almost adjoined the château, and the Germans were sounding the tocsin. . . . Before leaving the road for the fields, he looked back. Nothing yet in the long drive. . . . Their 'boot and saddle' was the leisurely process of reserve troops! 'Aie, Aie!' resounded from all the neighbouring towers. He had roused the whole countryside. All the troops would spring to arms! The whole pack would be out. 'And I'm the quarry!'

Two miles in front of him the tall forest barred the horizon. He put on speed. To the side he saw little bits of earth spattering up, as if some invisible hare were running there: and suddenly, detonations burst on his ears. From behind a hedge, two hundred yards away, they were firing . . . firing at him! A rush of blood beat in his brain. Risk, honour, glory, swept round him. He had received that other baptism—and his family valued it at least as much as that of the Church—the baptism of fire. The young priest braced himself, and the pressure of his knees put his mount into a magnificent 'goat leap'. 'Bravo!' he cried. 'We'll go far, we two!'

They were still firing, but their range was too long, and the bullets sent grains of soil flying up into his face. 'Like salt!' he thought—and laughed. Was this all it needed: a score of bullets, a good horse, a little hatred,

was this all it needed to turn a holy man into a veteran soldier—a cossack? Gaston stroked his horse, and spoke to him: 'It's a pity I don't know your name, my beauty. But you're no German, my fine fellow, no!' The foot soldiers were firing still, but more for form's sake than with any real hope of a hit: the black figure of the priest made such a fine target against a countryside powdered with snow. He flew along on the edge of the ploughland, choosing his ground well, galloping over the artificial meadows—the fields of sainfoin, where the crop had sufficed to maintain the hardness of the soil in spite of a slight thaw on the previous day. He looked round once more. The cavalry troop, in their attempt to follow him, were floundering in the soft ploughland. Good!

The great forest wall now showed less violent in colour. The abbé gave his mount a moment's respite, though he seemed quite fresh. Quite fresh? He laughed: a devil of a wind from the north gave you no chance to sweat as it cut through your hands and your face. 'Another window-pane broken,' muttered Gaston, repeating a seminary joke. 'Good, they're still shooting. They must be mad. No, not so mad! The d——!' In point of fact, the Uhlans were warning others, approaching them from the opposite direction along the main road, who as yet could not see the flying priest: they were scanning the fields through their glasses. The abbé slipped behind a thicket, where he got his breath back and took his bearings. 'We must risk it. The forest's still a couple of thousand yards away. Come on, my fine old Irishman!' He patted his horse again. 'For it's Ireland you're from. Pomerania never bred fire like that! Come on, we're going to make a dash for it! The Prussians are opening a pair of pincers, but we'll be in the woods before they nip us! *A nous Saint Georges*—the Cardinal's Saint George! Is this my last ride?' . . .

He knew a moment's base hesitation. Should he surrender now? No great harm would have been done. But as if he had received a blow, he felt the affront to his

own self. He seized the revolver from the holster, fired it into the air—purposely so—but in the direction of his pursuers none the less. He was declaring his own war, inexpiably! . . . 'Now—and God with us!' and Gaston, the tall soot-coloured jockey, with burning face and fists blue with cold, with a defiant spluttering of hoofs, dashed out into the open.

He pushed on his horse into an enclosed field, whose two hedges he cleared without a tremor. But at the second, he landed in the midst of a flock of sheep which the noise of the firing had driven there. They scattered, dogs barking, shepherds shouting. And then gay laughter held him. 'What a sight I must look—I always do!' But there was no bitterness in the thought. He was right! For he was letting his hair grow in true ecclesiastical style in accordance with the seminary rule, and the wind had made a fine mess of it. For a good time now the three-cornered biretta (the four horns were reserved for doctors of theology, which he was not!) had been lying on the stubble. His tangled hair blew all over his face. It blew into his mouth, and he spat it out; the wind gathered it into an Absalom's knot, and combed it with angry fingers, as if to drag him along by clutching great tufts of it. The stallion's movement as he shook his mane was repeated by his priest-rider. The clerical neck-band was flapping at his back now. He was naturally not wearing his riding cassock, and the one he had on had risen to his waist. The grey breeches, as the straining knees burst the buckles, had rucked up and his stockings had slipped down over his shoes, to reveal his smooth legs and muscular thighs. With a laugh that showed all his savage, shining ivories, he sped on, full of confidence.

Just then the sun pierced the clouds. This was his Austerlitz! The entire plain lit up triumphally, flaming beneath the cloudy sky. The wisps of straw and stubble, shining with sleet, looked like lighted fuses; the bare earth blushed red; every shadow was blue; the heaps of abandoned apples glowed like pyramids of gold. Behind him

the horsemen glittered. Six hundred yards to go! Hurrah!

But—before his mind even had perceived the fact, his legs checked the horse beneath him. For as the sun came out his eyes had discerned something terrible . . . thin, white vertical lines all along the forest edge! Fool! fool that he'd been! The fence! . . . the enclosure put up only the autumn before. The Germans were well aware of it, they rode here so frequently. They weren't hurrying to catch him, they were so certain that he'd fall into the trap. He must get through, but what a jump! First a ditch, and then that uncertain line of thin wire that the horse wouldn't see . . . *wouldn't see!* And now hope came back. There was a gate, a gate as high as the wire fence, but its bars were shining white . . . a terrible jump, but one that was clear and boldly outlined. 'Come on, we've got to get over that! It's chained—I can see the chain winding round it. Come on!' He patted the horse's neck. 'Come on, my boy, courage!' And suddenly, filled with an absurd conviction, a foolish hope, he went on in English: 'My boy! My good fellow! Do you see . . . d'you see the hindrance, the barrier?' He spoke with O'Bearn's sweet, singing Irish brogue. He was talking to the horse in Irish. And he understood, pricking his ears as he heard the accents of his young days. Gaston, wild with joy, would have ventured anything. The horse was gathering himself for a tremendous effort. 'Dear boy! Aoah!' . . . the gate. . . . 'Aoahhah!' cried Gaston, remembering O'Bearn at the jumping-bar. The Irish horse leapt up—and Gaston was up in the air now, trying and trying to relieve him of all the weight he could. 'Hurrah! Patrick! We're over!' And five yards beyond, the abbé rolled into leaves and thorns. Six seconds later, cassock tucked in, he was in the saddle once more, and plunging into the trees. He'd pulled it off—and all in a quarter of an hour!

CHAPTER XXV

THE CHIEFTAIN

HE had a good start. He was out of sight now, and the ground was perfect: it was bone dry and wouldn't show a trace of his passing. Success was certain. His pursuers might perhaps manage to break down the gate (a piece of solid Norman workmanship!) but even then the forest would stop them. And now, straight ahead and down into the dip. 'Half an hour more and we'll be there—eh, Patrick? Patrick! A saint's name. Shouldn't call a horse that. But what's the odds, he's earned his halo!'

And Gaston took up his chanting again in the Irish brogue to calm the trembling horse. What a fine story for his father, and even for the Cardinal when he went for his absolution!

And exactly half an hour later the twenty-five men, sleeping their uneasy sleep in a clearing, jumped to arms.

'Who goes there?'

A furious gallop approaching them, when they had thought themselves so well hidden!

'It's a boar, a wild boar!' cried their leader.

'France! France! You're betrayed! Up and follow me!'

The skirts of his cassock left among the branches, Gaston displayed a curious little black waistcoat torn at the ends. His trousers were tucked up so that they looked like a pair of bathing-drawers. His face was torn by the branches that had lashed it, yet he was laughing, with such a clear, gay laugh that at first they did not take him seriously.

'Hurry!' he went on. 'I'm only laughing because . . . because I'm glad I got through. Come on, single file, and only in the middle of the path. No footmarks anywhere else. Forward!'

Arriving thus, charged with action, he was invested with power. Thus leaders spring up. He was obeyed. Their captain, running ahead of the rest after Gaston's horse, stopped so suddenly that the next man nearly bumped into him. He went on again, but turned to his fellow.

'See that?' He pointed to a bald circle on the rider's head, a greyish, bluish patch carefully shaven. 'By God! It's a damned parson!'

Among the days from which the drab cloth of our life is woven there are some which run like threads of gold through the dull wool and the shoddy, and when, in some courageous moment, we pause to consider that monotonous pattern which death will leave unfinished, in that moment they shine vermilion-bright—and will shine so in our thoughts as the rabble shoots us down. This 24th of January held Gaston's bright hours. Never until now had he been so deeply aware of his usefulness to his fellows and his personal worth. Alas for so many prayers whose results none knew but that invisible company of the saints, prayers stored in heaven, but powerless to change the world around him! No prayer was lost: all were heaped up in the eternal granaries. But here, and now, by this effort of his he had saved the lives of twenty-five men. Unwarned and weary as they were, they would have perished without even a show of resistance. But he, the faltering, the soul-ridden, the laughing-stock of the energetic and the elegant, had triumphed. And Gaston rejoiced in this immense exaltation, this flowering of all his strength. The old La Bares, buried sword at side and dog or lion at their feet, approved him as they slept. Of course, he dissociated himself entirely from their deeds, judging them cruel or de-

praved, and yet a doubt lingered even here, as in a man who finds himself too directly opposed to current ways of thought. Could one go so far as to deny completely all that which made up the glory of an ancient house? But dully, behind these convictions, others more disquieting wound their way into his mind: risks such as he had taken—were they not father to other, forbidden, intoxications? And he remembered the Marquis's words: 'Man of battles—man of love.'

His piety rose within him, shaming him. It was souls that he must save, bodies did not count. And yet this glorious pulsing of his blood urged him forward, claiming that his conscience too should share the happiness that, physically, was his. He welcomed an unlooked-for thought: 'I did right. These soldiers seem to me like a band of lost children; their sins must lie heavy on their souls. By preventing them from a violent death I've won for them the time in which to repent. And what's more, haven't I set them a good example? These half-pagans, swearing at every stone they stumble at on the way, will owe their lives to a priest!' He resisted no longer, and the great flooding tide of his family and his hereditary instincts carried him away, sweeping him along as it had swept his ancestors.

With good reason might the priest worry over his new flock. Volunteers? It is a delicate matter to touch upon, for these men gave proof of an unfaltering self-sacrifice, they showed such bravery that none has the right to lessen it. It is enough to suggest that morally they did not equal their own worth. There was many an outlaw among the men who followed the great Irish horse and swore as they went. Gaston had been furnished with a sheepskin coat, for his teeth had begun to chatter, and the white wrap was very welcome.

The oaths diminished, abandoned in favour of exclamations of a more moderate nature, as gradually the men came to realize what he was. A parson! The word

ran down the line. A damned parson, of all people, had risked his skin for theirs! Of the whole twenty-five there were not three who used the countryman's word 'abbé'. These men came from Paris, or near. Among them there were five foreigners, two being actually Germans. No one knew what crimes had made them flee their own country. Perhaps some of them, four months later to the very day, would be the murderers of Monseigneur Darboy! They made war as wolves hunt. But Gaston, in the first flush of victory, saw them as something very near to Christians in their readiness to die bravely: if it were not a pious death, it was at least a fine one.

The tenderness which he felt towards them did not diminish. Rather it grew. For the first time in his life he was leading a band of men. Their captain asked him where they were going. His questions seemed to be inviting Gaston's orders. The sudden power came naturally to him, but brought with it a wild elation.

His first thought had been to lead them towards the dense forests of the south-west. But he learned from the captain that the men were in immediate need of rest, and that his own chief had arranged a meeting-place at la Ruettes-aux-Loups, above La Chapelle, where, no doubt, he was expecting them. He was a Pole, a tough fellow, with plenty of followers, at least a hundred volunteers. If they could join up with them, their combined numbers would make a twenty-four hours' rest safe enough. 'Good!' muttered Gaston. 'I know the place. We'll be there by nightfall.'

They halted, as they could do now without danger. They had covered their tracks too well for pursuit to be an easy matter. *The horse seemed none the worse.* Gaston asked for some brandy. The men would have given it him, but when they found that he wanted to rub down the animal's legs with it, they were indignant.

'It's thanks to him, and to him alone, that you're here now,' smiled the priest. 'Wasn't that worth half a flask?'

At this, four flasks were forthcoming.

'They're decent fellows,' he thought.

Some of them were falling behind. He put two on the Irish horse. But when the captain suggested that Patrick should carry some baggage, Gaston shook his head severely.

'Impossible. He's a thoroughbred.'

'A thoroughbred, eh? He looks pretty solid, don't 'e, though?'

Gaston walked beside the horse, from time to time patting his neck and stroking him gently.

'Quite soft on him, ain't he?' grinned the volunteers. 'The parson's sweetheart!'

They were climbing now, and there was snow on the ground again. The forest was charming in its solitude and its loveliness. The snow covered everything with an immaculate purity. The bleak north wind, so cruel on the plain, blew no longer here among the trees: it was almost warm.

The only footmarks were those of animals, and the priest, walking at the head of the file, recognized each imprint as if it had been a portrait. The path beneath him told him of innumerable things. A stag and two does had passed this way in the morning: the marks of their feet were now lightly powdered with snow. Then, later, a boar: an old solitary boar, whose trail could be read on every heap of snow. Innumerable rabbits—their curious traces were everywhere: two paw-prints exactly level, touching one another, and then, in front, two others, slantwise. The quiet rabbit which hops along by springing from his two hind paws and coming down on his front. . . . Here a dog had startled them, and all their little tracks led to the burrow. . . . Then, a big hare, its paw-prints the same as the rabbits' but bigger and wider apart, with every fifty yards a little round cavity behind them, where the hare had sat up to take a look around—had stopped to think.

'And we're like wild game, too,' ran the young abbé's thoughts, 'they're hunting us. When man ceases to be a conqueror, he becomes a poor little hunted beast. And I'm leading the herd.' Suddenly, he thought of the Prefect of Congregation . . . if he were to see his dear son at the head of these brigands! Gaston laughed to himself.

'Everything all right, Monsieur le Curé? Satisfied?'

'Why, yes! We're getting near; but there's a nasty moment coming, I'm afraid.' He pointed down to the snow. 'Here's the third trace of Prussian boots! And we'll soon be at Anceins, where there's bound to be a patrol. The Germans don't care to go into the forests, but they keep a close watch on them. They post sentries on the fringe and keep them marching up and down: so we must keep our eyes and ears open.'

'If need be,' grumbled the man, 'we could make 'em a bit colder than they must be already, those sentries!'

'What?' muttered the priest. So this was war! And he thought of those two little white coffins.

'To get to la Ruette-aux-Loups without losing your way, remember that you've got to follow up the first stream you come to. There's no actual path, but you can't fail to find the place. I'm going to ride off now. If the Prussians follow me and don't get me, I'll join you at the Calvary—I'll lead them a dance and then come back. The rest of you, make the most of the commotion, and go through. If there's no one in Anceins, I'll come back and join you.'

'But,' began the captain, 'suppose they——' He stopped. 'What's your name, Monsieur le Curé, so's we know who we owe all this to?'

'L'abbé Gass', answered Gaston, 'and, in that case, pray for me! Come down, my friends, I want the horse. You haven't got an old crust or two? Here, Patrick!'

From all sides the men came up with stale tit-bits.

'Monsieur le Curé,' the leader went on, with a serious note in his voice which sent a shiver down Gaston's back.

'Monsieur le Curé, the men would like to have the honour of shaking hands with you!'

'I too,' he replied.

He rode up to the edge of the forest and looked at the little village. All was still. It seemed incredible that this tiny, peaceful place, this toy town, could suddenly send out crashing volleys of death. The sun was sinking over the narrow valley, with that dun light which meant a further fall of snow: vague gleams and sombre shadows. Every roof still wore its white snowy fur, and smoke was rising from all the chimneys. On every fire a good hot meat soup would be cooking. . . . Gaston felt tired, and as 'hollow as a silver saint', but he pulled himself together and strained his ears: at this hour they would be taking things easy . . . there was not a sound from the horses. . . .

How calm it was! A little boy was watering a slide. If Gaston were arrested—for he had no pass authorizing him to move around—he would be detained and recognized, and then—shot. So be it, then. He prepared his soul. He believed himself to be in a state of grace. In his mind he said good-bye to his father, who would be so proud of him; to his mother; and to Manfred, who, perhaps . . . But Manfred . . . He rode on.

And nothing happened! Nothing—when he was prepared for the worst. After he had hidden among the trees bordering the meadow to conceal the fact that he had come from the forest, he rode up the slope at a trot to draw attention to himself. The child with the jug watched him interestedly; two women looked out of their doors and went back speechless with fright. The forge glowed red, the smith was still at his work, hammering a shining shoe. Gaston stopped in front of him. The man raised his head and sketched a salute with his hammer.

'Any Prussians here?' asked the priest.

'They left a week past. There's just one post at Notre-

Dame.' And then, suspiciously, 'Who are you? Asking such questions?'

Gaston made no reply. He went to the baker's and, with a grim note in his voice, announced:

'I'll take ten loaves!'

'But——'

'Ten!'

Two hams were hanging from the rafters.

'And these. I'll pay double.'

It was only by chance that he had the money with him. This time the chieftain in him was only thinking of his men. The thoroughbred was relegated to the ranks, and Patrick was soon covered with victuals, clumsily tied up with string.

'Now some wine.'

He took twenty bottles, stacked firmly upright in a packing-case without a top, and paid double for these too. Propping up the box in front of him on the saddle-bow, he supported it with his arms. Then he stooped down to the tradesmen, and spoke with a harshness that surprised even himself:

'Forget that I've been this way, or we'll come back and blow you to bits!'

What had come over him? His father couldn't have put it better.

Night was falling now, but he found his way back with ease. Towards five o'clock, *his* men—what he felt for them was nothing less than that complete proprietorship which implies devotion to what it owns—reached la Ruette-aux-Loups. A fair number of soldiers filled the little valley, and after some communication between the two troops, the chief came out to greet him.

The men had rigged up some little huts with branches and dried bracken: there were even two canvas tents; the spot was wild enough. The volunteers gathered round the little fires, built for the sake of concealment in hollows: their flames would not be suspicious, for there were still

lime-burners and charcoal-burners in the forest, and they were authorized to continue their work on account of the severity of the winter. Moreover, if the forest was a salient point, la Ruelle, in its hollow, could only be overlooked from very close at hand. The chief was a striking figure: a Pole who spoke a very pure French—too pure, in fact, and on a somewhat insistent note; his language had an ironical elegance. He seemed a man of formidable strength: his shoulders might have been padded with epaulettes beneath his coat. He was ragged, he was not too clean, but none the less he had a certain dignity. His blue coat was girdled at the waist with a red sash. Long fine moustaches curved across his white face. He never laughed, and this fact contrasted oddly with his precious manner of speech (which is usually accompanied by deprecatory smiles)—and it gave him a menacing air, as if he were about to break into a sudden fit of anger. The man was a ruffian.

‘I can only offer you, Monsieur le Curé, a place by the fire, and not the more comfortable lodging of my tent. I am a married man.’ For once, the fraction of an ambiguous smile indicated what sort of marriage he meant. ‘The captain has told me of your great service. Allow me to offer my profound thanks.’

‘I’ll sleep very well by one of the fires,’ said the priest. ‘I’d got out of the habit of riding, and I’m very tired.’

‘I should be very glad to add a chaplain to my troop, monsieur. Our company would have been complete.’

‘I am only a seminarist, and not ordained. When we’ve had a rest, my horse and myself, we’ll be setting out for the south—or the west, rather. I mustn’t be caught . . . with God’s help!’

‘We all hope not, Monsieur le Curé.’

Gaston’s volunteers had prepared for him a bed of leaves and ferns. He was touched by the care they showed for Patrick’s comfort—he, too, would be able to sleep dry. The young priest felt so happy that the consciousness of his happiness disturbed him; and his father’s words came back: ‘What an officer you would have made!’ He

stretched himself out, and went to sleep at once by the side of his horse.

When he awoke in the still night, it was to know a moment's bewilderment. He had forgotten where he was. Fires were gleaming everywhere. He would wait for the moon to rise before setting out. What time was it? The thoroughbred stretched out his neck and blew on his face. Gaston patted him with a 'Good evening, Patrick!'

He noticed with astonishment that around him were a greater number of men than he had supposed. The scene was a strange one, with all the fires glowing and leaping up. The gleam of them spread far into the forest, outlining the trees like figures in a shadow play, like delicately wrought silhouettes—the 'black pictures' that were so popular in days gone by. How many men were gathered here! All in a silence which ill fitted so much bustle. Perhaps it was noise they feared more than light. For the light could always be put down to the industries of the forest, while noise . . .

And so this ant-like swarming, this coming and going from group to group, was wrapped in a complete silence: it gave the scene a disturbing impression of unreality. This place was so very near to the very centre of diabolism. Had Federspiel's forest demons possessed the soldiers? Gaston shrugged his shoulders. The soldier in him pitied the child of yesterday. This was only a very human orgy. Those men moving about in the firelight, leaping, reeling heavily, with light and shadow flickering on them from every side, while bursts of laughter broke out at last, and rags of muted songs, were only rather drunk, though they might give the impression of being under an evil influence. And the scene became a scene from a melodrama, set as it was in the depths of night, with that unforgotten danger so near by.

Little by little, the diapason increased. Some of the men hoped to escape recognition by wearing civilian clothes,

stolen from prosperous peasants. Many of them flaunted old-fashioned high hats, and were greeting one another with sweeping, mock-courteous gestures. There were gipsies among the band juggling with balls and bare knives, the gleaming blades cut shining arcs through the air. There were acrobats, too, turning successions of cartwheels, so that the light of the fires threw up in black relief the figures of men wheeling past in some unnatural progress, feet in air. The wine-cups clinked, the jugs poured streams of wine. No, better than wine. One of the drinkers, raising his glass as a libation to some unknown demon, drank it down—and threw the dregs into the fire. And Gaston understood. Livid flames sprang up: light, flickering, silky blue. . . . The whole band, delighted, did likewise, and the forest shone blue with an unearthly radiance, stirred and trembled, as if all the heather, the trees, the very snow itself, were but just now sprung from the flames around those pallid figures.

The priest, in spite of his new-found strength, was filled with dismay, but it was soon dissipated by an onrush of warmth and tenderness, a perfume full of sun and autumn—the smell of an orchard in September, the sweet, heavy smell of apples in this cruel winter snow. The men were drinking alcohol—cider-brandy. There were three squat barrels on trestles: they had soon emptied them.

And alas! in this brighter light the abbé became aware that there were women here too, loose women, camp-followers of this little army, poor girls in bonnets, natives of this region where there was no morality: women for greedy kisses, mingling their sharp cries with the raucous shouts of the men.

Hubbub and disorder grew. Gaston looked towards the east. He must go. He struck his repeater watch—Leathernose's watch. Nine o'clock—still half an hour before the moon would rise. The ride would be difficult. He must keep to the crest of the forest in order to strike

le Bocage. He must ride only at night, and seek hospitality from the peasants in the day-time.

He closed his eyes so that at least he should not see. But the noise was increasing. Caution? Caution was flung to the winds. The songs could not have rung out louder. Happily Gaston heard only fragments, for they warred against each other. On looking once more, he could see that *his* men were trying to check the brawlers by pointing him out. But the others only laughed the more. *His* captain himself was hugging some great half-naked blonde.

He could stay here no longer. After all, he knew the roads of this region well enough not to lose his way before the moonlight came. But he wanted to say good-bye to some of his new friends, and to ask for a piece of bread for Patrick. He moved towards his volunteer band. The songs seethed up.

‘He was a Grenadier and from Flanders he came home

And she had two, two,
And she had two, two,
And she had two fine apples.’

The smell of the brandy embalmed the air like a summer breeze: he wanted to taste it. He took the cup which was offered him, and drank it down—a burning cider-brand of that year’s crû. But he felt the better for it. The Pole appeared near his tent, trying to quieten the hubbub. The men gathered gaily round him: he must drink! He drank like a well, cup after cup, and the men cheered him. They began beseeching him: there was something they wanted from him. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, that imperceptible smile, from the corner of his mouth. And Gaston heard a cry go up: ‘The Queen! The Queen!’ Patrick had finished. Gaston put his bridle on, and now he began to move from one man to another, shaking hands. All showed him a friendship that touched his heart. He decided to remain for a moment longer, and struck up a conversation with a Verneuil man who knew

O'Bearn. And a silence, almost complete silence, fell. 'Sh! Sh!' went round the throng, and absolute quiet reigned.

A voice rose, an admirable voice, for all that it was somewhat thick and guttural. And hearing it, the abbé stood rooted to the ground, trembling.

'When Renaud came back from the Wars
With his insides in his hand
His mother . . .'

Gaston turned round. In front of the Pole's tent, from which she must have come, a tall woman was singing. She too was wearing a sort of uniform, a short frock with a red sash: and she had fair curls. . . .

No! No, it wasn't possible! God couldn't have permitted such a monstrous thing. For Gaston saw a terrible likeness, an abominable likeness. . . . He went down the slope, drawing his horse after him. And yet, that sad little mouth, that incomparable stature. . . . Ah! who else could cry her pride to the whole earth like that:

'Your wife's brought to bed of a king!'

He went on, over the snow and the moss, through the silent darkness. He came to men standing in close groups, and moved by some strange impulse, mounted noiselessly—was it to see the better? And his horse disappeared into the black shadows. Upon the body of the rider there fell a few gleams of light, but his face, his pale face, shone like a mask suspended in that blackness—staring at Ferline, Ferline Licurre . . . a whore.

Suddenly the singer stopped, bent forward, plunged her eyes into the dark. A hundred pairs of eyes followed hers. Light! She must have light! And into the glowing heart of the fire she flung the entire bowl of brandy which was waiting for the final punch. The flame shot up in a tree of fire, and the men fell back with curses and laughter. Rivulets of flame shrivelled the smoking snow, and horse

and horseman were lit up in a pitiless sheet of light. The woman stood craning towards that high, livid face, watching her with such reproach and such sorrow. She stood as if transfixed by all her past.

'They know each other! They know . . .' the whisper ran.

Suddenly, a thundering voice—not his own, he was too frail for that command which came none the less from his own mouth:

'Make way! *À moi, Ferline!*'

The horse leapt forward. She—a La Bare!—did not even step back as neck and shoulders touched her. On the contrary, she was ready. Her powerful thighs obeyed, raised her at the same moment as two hands seized her breast-high at the arm-pits; and she was on the saddle-bow while, rearing wildly over the fire, the thoroughbred turned and galloped off into the night and the valley ahead.

'Shoot him! My God!—shoot him! He's got my woman. Give me a gun!'

Shots rang out, with flashes of horizontal flame, and the woman screamed. Turning round for a second, Gaston saw a confused *mêlée*: the men were fighting; his own men were covering his flight! And then blackness closed in behind him, and soon, because no one could follow them, they settled down to a steadier pace.

Ferline was crying. Gaston felt her trembling sobs against him. He brought up his hand that was closed over the reins towards those shadowy curls, and smoothed her cheek with his knuckles.

'Don't cry, Ferline, my Ferline. . . . It's over now. Lift yourself up a little. . . .'

'I can't.'

'There—like that. Don't try and talk. Don't cry any more.'

It was done now, that act of savage decision, unpresaged:

an act inspired not alone by the day's exaltation and its new-found power, in which the soldier, the leader of men, had proved his strength. . . . How many La Bares had carried off their women thus, their flesh tingling against the flesh of their prey! And here was one more victim—yet, no! for this one (in so far as such an impulse can rise above the sensual) was not to be lost but saved.

It was the same gesture, sprung from the very marrow of his bones. The Hordon in him had found that twist of the legs around his horse and that swing of the thighs, had known where to clutch her for the firmest grip. But his goal was a spiritual goal.

And Gaston was not in the least astonished at himself. As they trod down the heather at an easy hunting gallop, he was at peace. The lovely heavy burden warmed his breast. He had changed the reins to the left hand, and his right now supported Ferline's knees, his left her armpits.

'Don't be afraid; we'll save you, Ferline.'

The horse was galloping smoothly, and yet she implored:

'Slower, slower! Please go . . . slower.'

Gaston obeyed. No one was following. Around lay only emptiness: the horse's hoofs crunched on through the snow.

The moon rose. Its great reddish disc overtopped the heights and a glimmering light rather than an illumination softened the night. The going had been good. They would ride like this all night, and then take shelter in some cottage. From there, Gaston would send for money—plenty of money. Ferline should go and join Aimée and the horses in the Channel Islands.

They went on quietly, as if riding in a dream. But she was uneasy. At the slightest jolt as the horse side-stepped, she groaned. The light of the moon rose and grew whiter, became strong, almost palpable. The snowy branches glistened. When an owl alighted on a branch—and there were many owls on the wing, with the glint of the moon

in their eyes—the cumbrous bird showered a sudden frozen hail. Far off a wolf or a lost dog howled to the moon; and all around were the noises of a moonlit winter's night, as fitting as the cry of the cuckoo on a spring day.

‘It’s beautiful! Isn’t it beautiful, Ferline?’

She did not reply. He looked at her soft curls, and that pure profile which lay against him. The mouth was twisted wryly. She was slipping off the horse. He pulled her up, and heard her moan again—a moan of pain. And then he himself cried out. The hand that supported her knees was black, and suddenly wet and warm.

‘You’re wounded!’

‘A bullet—in the stomach!’ she murmured.

CHAPTER XXVI

FERLINE

AND so ended the brief enchantment that had transformed the boy and made of the spasmodic dreamer a man of action. Sorrow, anguish, regret—ah! regret!—filled that plaintive heart once more. The elation had furnished impetus enough to carry him forward for a little longer, but he felt his strength failing; his power, that magic power, was ebbing away.

His hands clasped Ferline more firmly.

'We'll get you well, Ferline,' he stammered.

Without further delay he looked about for a house where he could leave her in some one's care. The La Bares hunted the forest regularly. He must find a ranger who would recognize him.

'Is it very painful, Ferline?'

'Yes. Slower. . . .'

Arrived at a forest lodge, he knocked. They opened the door immediately he shouted his name. Inside was an old ranger above military age, with his wife and grandson. The door was barricaded, but when others were in need of help, they forgot their fears readily enough.

'I'll go to Laigle and get the doctor,' said the man, and he and his wife took in their arms the poor, pain-racked creature who had been the lovely, the imperious Ferline. The woman laid her on the bed she had just left.

'She's in a very bad way, monsieur. I'm afraid she's dying. Perhaps I ought to bring a priest as well?'

Gaston was only too familiar with that sure instinct of the peasant—that animal certainty at the approach of death.

He helped undress her, cutting her clothes away. And his strength came back as he lifted her carefully to ease

her pain. But as her clothes and her underthings fell from her, the gushing stream of dark, black-clotted blood horrified him. At last he saw a gleam of that lovely body—the big, beautiful thighs, long and flat and finely moulded. And there, near the groin, a little below the right hip, was a blue, bleeding hole, welling up continuously.

‘Poor soul, poor soul!’ muttered the old woman, as she tried to staunch the wound. ‘I’ll get the lint I had ready for our troops. . . .’

She laid out a thick roll of bandages. There was more blood everywhere. The woman traced the course of the trickles, and found that the right leg was torn: the bullet had passed through it first, ripping the surface of the flesh like a knife.

To modesty the old woman gave not a thought, but set about changing and washing her patient. A great fire of faggots was burning on the hearth, spluttering as it lit and warmed the room. The last scraps of Ferline’s clothes fell, but Gaston closed his eyes and did not see her stretched out, long and slender as a lily, on the rough brown sheets. He supported her in his arms, without wishing to know the fleeting and incomparable beauty of her body. But behind his closed eyelids, he could perceive it still, for each time he touched her some immaterial vision sprang up before his mind. When he looked next, Ferline was dressed in a long, coarse, grey chemise: her lovely head and shapely arms seemed strange against it. She appeared to be suffering a little less, to have emerged from her torpor. She smiled.

‘Be brave, Ferline!’

‘I’ll try. . . . Give me your hand.’

He did as she asked, but the touch of Ferline’s hand chilled his with cold, and he was frightened. The woman, whose help he invoked with an anguished glance, came near and looked into Ferline’s face with a slight hopeless sigh; then she went back to the hearth, and her prayers.

Gaston was weeping, softly, without bitterness. Ferline stirred. She spoke.

'He loved me, you know. He was very good to me. He'd have kept me all his life, if he hadn't been the eldest son. . . .'

'Don't talk, Ferline; rest.'

She fell back into silence for a few minutes; then went on slowly:

'Monsieur le Marquis came . . . "You must leave him, Ferline. My son must marry, I must marry my eldest son, Ferline. . . ." When mother died, Manfred sent me into the town . . . so there shouldn't be so much deceit about it. . . . I used to wait for him all day. Monsieur le Marquis said . . .—he's not a bad man, Monsieur le Marquis. . . . And so I went away. . . . Poor boy! He suffered. . . .'

She lifted herself up painfully.

'But I couldn't live alone, like a widow. It was too sad. Don't tell Manfred. Let him think I was a good girl, and remember me like that. Then I'll die happy. Promise me. . . .'

'Yes, I promise, Ferline. But don't try to talk any more.'

'I was three years older than him. . . . It hurts. . . . It was the twenty-fifth of August when he fell off his horse, near the orangery. . . . I thought he was dead, and I was so scared and wretched. . . . His dear head was covered with dust. I kissed it. 'Twas my kiss woke him. He put his arms round my neck, and kissed me back, and then . . . everything was lost, everything. . . .'

'Ferline, have pity for me.'

'I liked you too. But he was so handsome, such a seigneur—and so sweet. If you only knew! I used to call him "Dou-Man'dou." Ah! I loved him still more when I left him and—and the others took me . . . like an animal. God!'

'Don't cry, Ferline, I understand. I love you.'

She smiled ineffably, and shook her head. She was dreaming aloud now.

'Love me? Yes, I know, *mon beau Manfred*. Your big,

tall Ferline, so tiny in your arms. . . . You must leave me, one day, Man'dou. But not till I'm old and ugly—and then you'll get married. . . . Take my beauty—to be your joy, Man'dou. How good you smell! Everything you touch smells lovely. Your brushes, your gloves. . . . Come nearer, let me smell . . . that La Bare smell once more. Come nearer. . . .'

The smell of La Bare! With that roaring fire in the room, Gaston had taken off the sheepskin coat, and from his linen emanated the subtle perfume of those sachets which, so often long ago, Ferline had put among the piles of linen in his drawers. The young man trembled in every limb: the dying woman had taken him for his brother. He drew back.

'Come,' she said, with effort, 'take me in your arms. I'm not a bad girl now. Take me in your arms, against your neck—let me put my curls there, Man'dou. Don't be angry . . . sit down on the side of the bed. Oh, gently, Man'dou! How lovely it is!'

As pale as the dying girl herself, Gaston had approached. He sat down, moving very slowly and carefully for fear of increasing her suffering, and took her in his arms as she desired. The chemise had slipped from one of her lovely shoulders—a woman's shoulders, whose beauty nothing in the world can equal, whose mystery no one can describe, nor the reason for their almost tragic appeal. That shoulder burned into his own. Clumsily he tried to pull the thick garment over it, but his hand drew back—it was not for him to touch. She smiled, exhausted to the limit of her strength.

'My shoulder that you loved so well—my "military" shoulders.' She began to pant. 'Kiss me, Man'dou!'

'Yes, my Ferline,' said Gaston, his voice very low lest he should disturb her dream. 'I'll kiss you, Ferline.'

He kissed her curls, her temples. . . .

The priest arrived. Gaston saw him with red eyes and

did not recognize him, and yet he was an old man he loved well.

'My dear friend, leave us,' he said, with pity in his voice.

Gaston was ready now to obey any order. He withdrew his arm.

'Oh, Man'dou, don't go, don't go. . . .'

'I must confess her.'

'Don't go, Man'dou . . . don't.'

She was growing paler and paler.

'Ah! No, no!' Gaston tightened his arms around her once more, sobbing. 'Let's leave her alone. She's paid.'

In any case, there was no time. The old curé knelt down, and the two men, both equally poor in spirit, but richer of heart than all the wealth of human knowledge, saw Ferline die, and sheltered her soul with their prayers.

CHAPTER XXVII

FEDERSPIEL

AT dawn the next day a great horse, carrying a priest, made its slow way across the plains, as if an equal lassitude weighed upon rider and mount; an irresolution in which both shared. The darkness lifted little by little from the fields, but night still hung in the dense shadows. And the whole landscape was as unreal as if a stroke of lightning had illumined it in the depths of night.

Over the earth, the clouds spread their dark, smoky ceiling, massed, swollen and lowering, or dragging their turgid weight across the sky. Lead-coloured clouds, oxidized, ringed with pallor.

From the midst of them the light of morning spread at length, and the immensity of the plain was revealed, in all its emptiness, a void. Not even a robin at the roadside. And in the heart of it, a tiny figure in that vast landscape, the horseman. One at a time the horse's hoofs broke the barren silence; and such was its torpor that each step was a hammer-stroke, carrying to the very horizon.

Gaston was going back.

The curé of Montrond had lent him a cassock, had helped him to put it on, and had offered to guide him westward. He had refused. He seemed to have lost all consciousness as he stood there shaking his head. He had left the rest of his money at the cottage. Ferline was to be buried in the Tainchebraye cemetery. Then, embracing the old curé, he got on his horse and rode off.

Horse and man were still one, in that mysterious accord: moving onwards to the same goal, down into the Plat-Pays, the lower country, the same instinct guiding them. The horse's steps dropped slowly over the hills

and valleys; slowly over the frozen roads and over the clay; through tall colonnades of trees, still with that measured pace, the untiring hammer-strokes of a man nailing something down.

Near Rieusses, some one sprang to the horse's bridle. It was the taverner, a man of ill repute. The rider did not even seem to hear his shouts. He was astounded to see Monsieur Gaston coming back.

'They're mad with rage, monsieur! Go back! Hide! Ah! but you did a fine thing there, monsieur!'

But Gaston made no reply. And the horse went on.

At ten o'clock the German commandant left the house. He had reached the middle of the avenue when he fell back—for fifty yards in front of him he saw the great bay and Gaston, moving slowly forward. The Prussian was a soldier. He dug in his spurs and was alongside the priest in a second.

'Fly! Fly! I haven't seen you.'

Gaston shook his head, with that same movement, as if it ached. The other man pleaded with him. He must get away. The men admired what he had done, but duty was duty. What he had done was treason, and every one knew of it: so 'Fly for your life!'

Gaston shrugged his shoulders and deliberately took up that steady pace once more towards the château. It was too late now. Other officers had noticed him and were running up. The commandant called them. What else could he do?

'It's all up now, monsieur!'

Gaston smiled faintly, thanking him with a slight gesture. And he pronounced that same phrase that he had spoken fifteen years before: the words with which his prowess had begun, and on which it was now to close:

'I . . . I'm taking the horse back.'

The Marquis de La Bare was in his study, busy at the fire. He was making bird-traps, for the Prussians had taken

all his guns and this was the only way of defending his crops, if he was to have anything left in the spring. The Marquis loved this sort of cooking, even if it made them grumble in the kitchens because it resulted in burned saucepans, discolorations and stains everywhere. He had his recipes: this was one of the most precious. By means of fresh holly bark and cherry-tree gum a mucilage is formed which after reducing slowly over a gentle fire makes a sort of pitch of extreme tenacity. It is used to dress the branches, so that the winged marauders are caught by their claws. For crows, you take a funnel-shaped vessel full of meat covered with this glue, and stick it into the ground. The bird plunges his beak into it, then his head, and is held fast, suffocated and blinded. The crow tries to fly, but falls back stunned, to be finished off with a stick.

While thus occupied, he was listening unconsciously to the regular beat of Federspiel's footsteps. In spite of the cold, the tutor had been pacing the terrace for an hour. Suddenly they stopped.

'Frozen stiff!' thought the Marquis.

And then 'that' happened.

'La Bare! La Bare!' cried a strangled voice. The Marquis was stupefied. No one ever addressed him as 'La Bare' now, since Aimé-Gaspard de Clermont-Tonnerre was dead, and the old duc de Broglie very ill. Some one was running upstairs, looking for him. 'La Bare!' It was Federspiel. Was he mad? He had always been so polite. Red-faced, beside himself, the tutor burst into the study.

'Quick! Some decent clothes! Come and help me. Gaston's in danger of his life! An escapade—tell you later. I may be able to save him, through Mecklembourg—I know him. Give me a decent coat!'

He rushed out again and ran to the stairs.

'Saddle two horses,' he ordered, 'and bring them round at once.'

The Marquis got busy. He was an old campaigner

and nothing must interfere when he had to act quickly; but none the less, he was surprised.

'Monsieur le Marquis,' the German went on, a little more calmly, 'don't worry. I have hope. And seigneurs as great as you yourself have given me their aid in the past. Let's hurry!'

There was not a valet left in the house. It was the Marquis who helped the agitated tutor to dress.

They rode as quickly as the poor broken-down mounts—all their conquerors had left them—would allow. On the way, La Bare learned the whole story. Tears of pride sprang to his eyes, and he sat more uprightly in the saddle. The war had already taken ten years off his age. 'Do you know His Highness?' he asked, with some hesitation—for he felt that reticence was necessary here.

'Please don't ask me any questions,' came the reply. 'I hope for great things. They can't possibly——'

Federspiel volunteered no more information. As they came to the gates of Broglie the gate-keeper greeted them in a friendly but sorrowful fashion. Had Gaston's fate already been decided? No—the man's melancholy sprang from his position as guardian of a conquered domain.

They rode on through the archway and into the courtyard, where a number of good-looking young officers in full dress were kicking their heels. And in a voice incredibly hard, which no one had heard from him hitherto, Federspiel, who cut a good figure in the Marquis's clothes, in spite of his sorry horse, called to the senior of them:

'Rittmeister!'

The officer stared at him blankly.

'Rittmeister!' he repeated, even more forcibly. 'Come here—*um mit mir zu sprechen!* Quickly! *Schnell!*'

The officer obeyed. Federspiel spoke to him in low tones, and gave him a sealed letter which he had written before setting out. The 'Huzzar of Death', with a stiff salute, went off at the double.

As the Marquis watched, he seemed to be moving in a day-dream still. In some curious fashion, he felt sure that Gaston was safe now. But the unreality persisted, and La Bare stiffened with incredulous surprise as the Grand Duke of Mecklembourg himself appeared, in obvious haste. His head was bare: he had only paused to throw a fur mantle over his shoulders. Once clear of the door, he started perceptibly. . . .

Federspiel dismounted slowly, and with a smile took off his hat, but he did not move forward. The Grand Duke looked at him—as the Marquis put it later—with something very near to anguish. With a gesture of his hand, he swept the onlookers away, and La Bare himself retired to the middle of the courtyard. The two men talked quietly together, Federspiel raising his arm once with a sweeping gesture that seemed to express sorrow and discouragement. They went on speaking in low, rapid, lively tones, for at least ten minutes. An animated talk.

'That's settled then,' said the Grand Duke at last, in French. 'I don't want to prolong your anxiety. Your son is pardoned, monsieur. I'll give the necessary orders.'

Two officers hurried off. The Marquis wanted to express his gratitude, but the Grand Duke swept him aside. What was a rustic squire to him? La Bare smiled. The two men began talking again.

Mecklembourg seemed to be inviting Federspiel indoors, but the tutor declined. They shook hands warmly. Then Federspiel made a sketchy—and, as the Marquis was sure from the little smile that accompanied it—an ironical salute. The Grand Duke suddenly embraced him: and they parted with saddened faces.

And that was all. Nothing more was ever known. The tutor died some years later and was buried, under that name which must have been false, in one of the little cemeteries near by, beside his peasant wife from Montreuil.

The Grand Duke, when questioned by a pretty, in-

discreet little lady who wanted to know if Federspiel were in reality a *grand seigneur*, replied simply:

'He was a man who chose the better part.'

It was rumoured that he was a Habsburg. But when the comtesse de Bernberg searched the Almanachs de Gotha (she had them all), she could find no evidence in support of this supposition. According to others, he was the illegitimate son of the Czar Alexander I and a German princess of the highest rank. It was her arms which adorned his telescope. He had been educated at Neu-Strelitz with the Grand Duke. . . . And now all that remains of him is a tombstone, engraved with a name much less distinguished than the death-mask, taken from that enigmatic and noble face, would suggest.¹

¹ Monsieur de la Varende recently discovered in a private collection a valuable gun reputed to have belonged to Louis XVI. A coat of arms had been obliterated and Federspiel's name took its place. Enquiries proved that Federspiel had possessed such a gun, which he declared had been given to him by Count Estherhazy, who had it from Louis XVI. This seems to establish some very close connection between Estherhazy and Federspiel—but only deepens the mystery.

PART IV

'He gave me back a grain of gold.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

L'ABBÉ DE LA BARE

GASTON now went to live in Conches, a little neighbouring town, under the surveillance of the Prussian police. His exploit never became widely known and its importance was minimized, for there are some of us who have not even the right to be heroic when the world has decided that we shall be ridiculous. The clergy alone gloried in the deed—strangely enough, for it was far removed by nature from the virtues to which they usually lay claim. All the old priests cherished the dazzling memory. And the Germans too found much to esteem in this priestling knight, with the result that after three days he was told that he could now go his way in peace: his papers of identity would be restored to him. His altruism had touched these men of the sword.

The abbé had changed, deeply, and, it seemed, for good. His hesitancy seemed to have disappeared. He had never been a great talker, but his silence now did not suggest shyness or nervous anxiety, but rather the resigned sadness of a mature mind. When he did speak, he was hindered less by his stutter. That fatal day and its terrible night had strengthened him and made him a man. His work now lay in tending the wounded, teaching the children their catechism and caring for them.

The siege of Paris had ended with the setting up of the Commune: men's hearts were filled with shame. The

hard winter was wearing away now, but still in sheltered places towards the north the snow glistened.

On his return from Vespers one day Gaston thought he saw one of the La Bare carriages crossing the square, with his father and Matlaw. If he doubted for a moment, it was because he had seen the reins in the coachman's hands. His father wasn't driving?

He hurried on, and arrived at his lodging almost at the same time as the carriage. It had just stopped outside the little garden. He was seized by a growing dismay. His father was in blue, yes—but the coachman and the horses wore mourning. . . . Gaston leant against the wall, unable to pronounce a word. Monsieur de La Bare climbed out, his back towards his son. When Gaston saw his face, ravaged, fierce in its expression, his eyes red and bloodshot, he wrung his hands. The old man came forward and seized him by the wrist.

'Manfred's dead!' He pronounced the words in a strong voice, almost a shout. Then again, even louder, 'Manfred's dead!' and with his left hand he pointed towards the east.

Passers-by stopped.

'Let's go in——'

They went into the house. The Marquis sat down near the door. Gaston remained standing, his back against the wall.

'He was killed by the Communards, on Friday!'

The seminarist wiped away a few tears which gushed to his eyes, and began to pray. His father, chest thrown out, eyes closed, raised his head, as if trying to read some meaning into what he had just said. That meaning was so new to him that he must get used to it, must try and comprehend the inexorable fact.

Gaston made the sign of the cross.

'And mummy . . . how——?' he murmured.

'She always was a brave woman. Your presence'll do her good.'

'I'll try and get a safe-conduct. I don't think they'll refuse me. . . .'

'No need. I've all that's necessary—thanks to Feder-spiel again, who's got a complete pardon for you. You're free to live where you like.' He rose to his full height, with a pride that sent the blood to his face, and he spoke in a strange voice, a ringing voice, as though he were addressing his troops on the battlefield: 'Your brother died magnificently. One more La Bare fallen under the bullets of revolutionaries. But he'll be avenged. He was leading his section into fire, riding-switch in hand. He was mortally wounded, but he said to his men: "I want to die on the other side of the barricade." He had his wish. My eldest son carried on the glorious traditions of our house.'

He stood dreaming for a few seconds. A dry sob shook him. Then he turned to Gaston.

'Matlaw can pack your things. If you want to say good-bye to any one, do so now. I'll wait for you here. We shan't be able to leave again before six.'

Gaston's eyes fell.

'He needn't pack much. I shall only be able to stay two or three days—the week perhaps. The curé needs me too much. We're busy with preparations for the first Communion.'

'What?' said the Marquis, rising suddenly with all the violence of his youth. 'What's this? What are you saying?'

Gaston did not reply. He kept his arms folded and looked at the ground. The Marquis sat down again. Then he went on, in a changed tone, a lower tone:

'My dear boy, I came to take you back—to bring you home for good. I thought you would take his place. You aren't going to abandon us now? I never dreamed it for a second. Wait; say nothing yet. But it's inconceivable that you should persist in this wish to turn priest now!'

'I don't think I could live any other way, father.'

So there was to be a struggle. La Bare sensed it like the

fighter that he was, and marshalled his forces. Indignation filled him, but he put it aside. This was a battle. He must give his whole mind to it. Be calm!

'I understand,' he began. 'I admire your convictions and the nobility of your sacrifice. But at this hour there are greater things in jeopardy. Our family, my son. Its continuation through the centuries to come. The most sacred thing we've got—our name! You know that in 1656, when the eldest son died, Pope Alexander VII released his brother—who was already at Malta—from his vows. And you've taken no vows as yet. So you see that even a Pope considered the survival of a family line as of the first importance.'

Gaston did not speak.

'We're one of the very oldest families in the province. Nothing famous, I admit, but we've kept to our land, Gaston, and perhaps we're of more use than all the nobility at court—the office-holders. We've supported the peasant and given him a hand, trying to better his lot all the time, and we've never grown slack. Wherever you go in Ouche or Perche you'll find traces of us, and our presence has made the tenant farmers pretty prosperous and maintained the farms and the cottages in good condition. We've brought improvements, Gaston, and we've brought prosperity. We've been gardeners, if you like, tending the soil for a thousand years—and the rabble want to kill us off for the booty! Let them kill! But not before we've borne sons to carry on!'

He sighed heavily, and rushed on, fearing, no doubt, that it would be bad tactics to give Gaston a chance of opposing him: the boy's resistance might thereby gather strength. Though on the other hand, it might have been better to let him hurl his weapon in vain and weaken him in that way. Impossible to tell. One never can tell. . . .

'Whenever any one's possessions were attacked, no matter how far away, we've hurried to the defence, but we'd be thinking all the time of our own land, and the memory of it never left us. Why, Gaston, we even brought

back cuttings from the wars! Look around you. Manfred never showed any desire to go away, did he? We've been peasants so long that we stay here as a matter of course, doing everything we can to improve things around us. All the best stock—horses, cattle, fruit—and even farmers!—it's all due to people like us. And, mark my words, they're rare enough to-day! Every one wants to go to the towns, where they're all a lot of weaklings, even if they work.

'But I shall stay with our peasants too, father. I'll help them: I'll care for them.'

'Care for them! You don't make armies with doctors—you make them with soldiers—soldiers! The humblest priest could take your place in a parish—better than you, probably. They'll confide in him more than in you: they'd be too stiff with you. I know them. I know our Normans. And you, as a layman, with your knowledge of horses and your love for the country—why, you could play a fine part, Gaston, my son, and play it naturally, too. You can't play any part well if you're not at home in it.'

The Marquis mopped his forehead.

'The place you'd take could be an infinitely useful one—useful to God, too. Think of your mother's influence. Why, it's much more powerful than if she'd been a nun. Look at the way she upholds religion. And haven't I, too, done something for the Church? There's thirty priests or more who but for my help would still be at the plough. I've always shown respect for the Church; not always too easily, not without some reluctance, I admit, but that's neither here nor there.' A vehemence came back to him. 'You can't coldly, deliberately decide to annihilate—decide to be the last of the Hordons!'

'Yes.'

The word came without harshness or bravado. It was almost toneless, springing from some deep melancholy, from a contemplation of the sorrow of things, and its necessity. And the Marquis trembled at that little incisive

word. It was alive; it stung him like a bullet. He studied his son as he stood there, still leaning against the white-washed wall in his thin cassock. That haggard, ravaged face; that thin, ungainly body; that anæmic pallor. And yet there rested the whole hope of his house. Forty-one generations they could trace: in all their ardour, their will to survive, to procreate, to end in this—this funereal frailty. An unhealthy organism, but a living one, invested with the power of creating life, a rare life—a Hordon life, weakly, degenerate perhaps, but unique. From that source could spring a mass of Hordons, multiplying successively, enough to re-people an entire province, if——

‘Ah!’ thought the Marquis with horror. ‘I took care to have only two—and look at the result. I was glad to think they’d both be rich: my only two children. I’d better have had ten and let them go barefoot. I’m to blame! No, it’s the times, the laws. . . . To blame? That’s no way of thinking if I’m to win this fight. And I shall get no help, either from my wife or from Bonnechose—he’d betray me. I must be calm.’

He went on again. He must wear down that resistance with the patience of a Norman driving a bargain.

‘Look, Gaston. I’m not angry, but I can’t take that for an answer. For a moment, when you said you wanted to be a priest, I wondered if, through nervousness or weakness, you thought—you thought yourself unequal to the task of continuing our line. And then, on the other hand, your skill as a horseman—the whole district knows you’re a master at it—reassured me. And now, in addition, there’s your exploit in the war. Oh!’ Suddenly he forgot his distress. ‘I’d be proud if I’d done a thing like that! When the Grand Duke of Mecklembourg told me that your pardon was definitely granted, what do you think he said? “Congratulate your glorious son from me”!’ Tears of enthusiasm—the last tears of an old man—ran down the Marquis’s cheeks. ‘Ah, little one! That morning all the portraits of the old La Bares must have

smiled! Listen, let's end our talk for now, and go back. You owe that much to your mother. We can have it out at leisure, with nothing to hurry us. We'll start afresh.'

'No! I don't want you to go back still thinking there's a hope . . . a hope that it would be even more painful for me to have to destroy afterwards. I've made my decision. I shall be a priest.'

'Why? Give your reasons.'

'Because . . . everything you've just mentioned, and everything you're proud of—all of that will pass. It's only temporal: I can't attach myself to it. I'll only attach myself to the eternal, which doesn't pass. Enough of vanities.'

'Spare me the accent of Canaan, my dear child. One can speak of any subject under the sun without canting like that! But now, let's get this clear. In all this, you're only concerned about yourself—about your own salvation—and you fear you'd compromise it in the world?'

'Well, yes.'

'Good. And let me tell you that yours is a simple, egoistical calculation, for all its high-sounding phrases, and it isn't a very pretty one. Me, me, me—all the time! Remember that there are a hundred people at La Bare dependent on you. You can continue their happiness; yes, *their happiness*—and their betterment. But you're creeping away from all that responsibility, into your hermit's hole. "Look after yourselves as best you can," you say. "I'm comfortable enough!" And what if some fellow comes along who'll maltreat our folk, and crush them like dirt for what he can get out of them, sowing handfuls of hatred right and left! A hundred people, at least that, who'll be disappointed and bewildered—and, understand this—they'll despise you! For you'll have deserted and left your job undone. Do you want me to ask Matlaw? D'you want me to open this window and call out to him: "In our hour of misfortune, Monsieur Gaston abandons us: he denies us"?''

The Marquis, a redoubtable figure now, made towards the window.

'No!' pleaded Gaston, in a trembling voice.

'And you're right. That man there—that man who's fond of you—why, he'd very likely spit in your face! Ah! forgive your old suffering father. But don't you see—all I've lived for, ever, is—well, to continue. I've never felt that I was living for the day—for the comfortable present. I was part of the past, or, rather, the future. There's never been a present for me, Gaston. Use your imagination a little! What'll become of me if I must die in a doomed house?'

Gaston wiped away a few hot tears.

'There's the Roncerays,' he said weakly. 'Mummy's cousins.'

'The Roncerays!' cried the other man. 'Bretons! An insignificant family, too. Ah! those Bretons, it's their blood you've got! With their "Marry your neighbour, marry your cousin!" I'd sooner adopt one of my bastards!

'That should be simple,' Gaston replied, looking his father in the eye.

He did not look for long. Swinging round on his heel, the Marquis turned his back on his son for a few seconds. Then he sat down again, but pulled his chair round so that now Gaston did not see his face but his profile. And the silence continued, intensified by their emotions. At last La Bare spoke, with a movement of great dignity and no emphasis at all:

'Those words are a very harsh punishment for a few past follies. And they're very grave, coming from my son, my dear, pious son, who used to be so fond of me. They weren't like my son. If he pronounced them, it was because he felt his resistance weakening and because he must have his way. His passion for it is so strong that he must—he *must* break the chains that bind us.'

'Father—let me ask your pardon. Listen to me a moment longer!' Gaston's face took on something of its

old appearance. The features seemed troubled, frightened; and then calmer again. After a pause, in which he regained some of his forcefulness, he spoke, weighing each word:

'Father—it was in my arms that Ferline Lieurre, seduced by Manfred, abandoned by Manfred—*on your orders*—Ferline Lieurre, become a prostitute,—it was in my arms that she died.'

'Impossible!'

'It's true. I found her following the soldiers, sharing their captain's tent—a bandit's tent! Ferline—the noble, proud Ferline, and more than that, it seems, our cousin—by one of those horrible alliances on which we pride ourselves. Oh! I've often felt the satisfaction you drew from all that. I saw her in the middle of that band of volunteers, who were fighting heroically, no doubt, like us, but like us too, sinning gaily, blaspheming. . . . It's a terrible memory! I pulled her on to my horse and fled with her. The excitement of that day had robbed me of all power of thought. I was acting like an animal. They fired. She was wounded, and that night, the twenty-fourth of January, she died—happy to die.'

The young man could no longer see his father, or the bright narrow room in which he stood. He was living once more in that forest cabin, in the burning light of the faggots. His face was tortured with anguish, and his arms were bent now as they had been when he embraced Ferline's cold, lovely shoulder.

The Marquis fell silent. Gaston went on; and his voice was so low that his father, leaning forward to gather his words, almost touched him.

' . . . for four years, I'd known Manfred's secret, without his ever suspecting. I lived with that knowledge, and said nothing.' He sighed. 'It wore me down. And I knew that you knew too. I even thought you were proud of your son for being . . . the author of such . . . of such a crime. And then, when the situation became awkward,

you went to Ferline, and you said: "Give him up. My eldest son's not for you. You've amused him, flattered him—now go your way!"

There was a long pause. When at last Gaston continued his voice was low and toneless, sad and slow at first, but soon to grow firmer.

'And you, father—you want me to carry on all that. No! There must be no more seductions; no more poor, weeping girls and ill-starred births. I forbid it! And I've got the power to do it—to put an end to all that. It's a power that makes me tremble, but a power I intend to use. God has taken into account the fields you've sown, and the soil you've defended for so long, and your thousand years; but they were a thousand years of mortal sin, too. I too was once no less proud of our family. But now I know: I'm ashamed of them. They'd no pity and no morality. From a Christian point of view, they were worthless——'

'Enough!' Monsieur de La Bare stood up. 'Anything but that! Anything but words like that for them! Insult your dead brother, and me while I'm still alive. Good! The insult's a short one. But those others, the old La Bares, who were great . . . if impotence pleases you, don't impose your weakness on those who knew how to create! When you're going to kill, or be killed, you create! The women they took loved them, and the La Bares made them greater. It's the town that corrupted Lieurre. If she'd stayed in the country, like a widow, why, with her upbringing and her bit of a dowry, she could have married any decent fellow. The sins of the flesh as you call them—h'h! What does that matter if there's been tenderness as well! "We give ourselves each other."'

'Christ died for those sins too,' said Gaston. 'Every one of your kisses pierced Him with another wound.'

The Marquis was losing ground. He was confronted not with a child, but a man, a hard man. And now he tried to keep his hold by invoking authority.

'Once upon a time, you solemnly swore to obey the King. If Monseigneur, acting in the King's place, were to ask you to renounce your career in the Church and to save one of his most faithful families—if he asked you in his royal authority——'

'The comte de Chambord isn't legitimate. The duc de Berry had his first marriage illegally dissolved. "Whom God hath joined together . . ." France is doomed!'

'Doomed! The Kingdom of France will rise again! Be quiet. You're talking nonsense.'

'And what does the Kingdom of France matter? All that counts is the Kingdom of God. The kings of France were like all of you. Ah!' He groaned, and his lips trembled. 'May His reign come quickly.'

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'But look, Gaston, you could, by a decent marriage, do something to further your ideals. You could change us; you could better us, since you . . . judge us and our acts so blameworthy.'

The Marquis was making a last stand.

'I can't!' and Gaston's tears gushed out at last. The Marquis took courage once more. Was he on the eve of victory?

'I can't, father, I'm not free from sin myself—that two-fold original sin of the Hordons. I've their evil in me too. Listen. Try to understand. I held the dying Ferline in my arms. She took me for my brother and asked me for kisses; and I gave her kisses—on her hair, her cheeks, and her lips, which were even then growing cold. I gave them for my own sake—not for my brother, whom I hated, then, so bitterly. But more than that! I was so selfish in my folly that I . . . I wouldn't let her be confessed. . . .'

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'It's all over then,' said Monsieur de La Bare. 'Our house can die. Good-bye, my son; stay here. I'll go back alone. Those kisses that you gave her were the finest

thing you've ever done. Good-bye! You deserved better than you'll get. I can let myself out. Good-bye.'

The Marquis had gone. The coach drew off. Gaston listened to the dying trot of the horses. He went back into his little white-walled room. A great cold engulfed him, and for a moment, he felt giddy—the giddiness of a sudden, immense, empty solitude. Like an anarchist who had blown up a whole city and remained the sole survivor, he listened to the silence and surveyed the ruins around him . . . a frail revolutionary who had just sacrificed the effort of an entire humanity to his ideal, to the convictions of his bewildered soul. He had just annihilated those thousands upon thousands of beings who had lived in the past, who still lived in the pulsing of his blood, and the thousands more who would have lived through him, into the future.

He was lonelier than Adam; for Adam felt in him the stir of creation.

But in this utter loneliness, his exaltation grew. He had raised a barrier against sin, closed one gate in its path. He had lessened, however slightly, the suffering of the Crucified One. And he saw again the Christ of the oratory. There would be one inch of flesh on that bruised and tortured body that Gaston had saved and kept whole. Every Hordon's life was a sin, and there would be no Hordons more. They'd run their course: their passions had died at last. Gaston had helped to make the redemption less dolorous.

He was poor, stripped of his possessions. He was nothing any more; he had nothing; he was naked. A tiny creature in the palm of God's hand—that hand which

would close over him, and take him for its own. The breath of God would blow him wherever God wished, like a poor grain of seed, to grow where God ordained, for whatsoever purpose He would name . . . he was nothing but a scrap of humanity that belonged to God.

A great, grave joy rent his being, breathed through him, and bore him away. No emotion that he had ever known could compare with this mighty force. This was the hour of his absolute giving; his Advent. Even at Communion, his ecstasy had not reached this point of self-oblivion, of self-effacement; for then his heart, his grateful heart, had remained to him. But in this sweet and terrible moment, all consciousness was dissolved into a fervour of light, and his very being melted away.

The sun was flooding the room with level, violet-shaded rays. The tall window opened on to the forest—a lavender and violet haze, coloured now with spring. The sunbeams, passing through it, pierced each translucent bud and emerged diaphanous. The feathery trees were but a bright cloud over the face of the earth. An eternal spring awaited the soul: there was no more death. Suddenly, in the little garden, Gaston saw that the primroses had flowered, where only yesterday the pale snow covered them. Was it a sign? A grey bird, with white-tipped wings, sang near by.

He drew farther back into the room, and stopped in surprise. The window of the old house was a casement, with thick mullions, and the level rays of sunlight projected on to the farthest wall a huge cross, that lay dimly violet against that rosy background. The sun was holding out to him a giant crucifix.

And he understood that this apotheosis had not been achieved without suffering. He foresaw, from the human distress which still lingered in his soul, the pity for his father and the château, that there would be a tragedy in his happiness. He opened his arms, as if it were for him

that that sign waited. He went forward, drawn towards it, and leant against the wall. Arms outstretched, he pressed himself against the shadow, and the sun lit up a tall, living crucified figure, who had turned his back upon the world to kiss his cross.

HE lived for nine years; but that breath had not swept the seed to the promised land; the harvest whitened unfamiliar hills. Gaston was in Africa, struggling, suffering, giving praise to the glory of God. The cross had been too heavy: his father and the château were waiting there, on the brink of his soul. He could not go on. . . .

Twice he had tried to see them, to bring them the peace and the healing that could not be. He had seen his father, an old man, bent over two sticks, going from tree to tree in the park, with the château behind him, rose-coloured in the sun.

The second time, he did not even go so far. At the entrance to the avenue, he had encountered one of the old groundsmen wearing the Marquis's clothes. He recognized one of his coats, from ten years ago . . . and the joyous moments of his childhood flocked back. The man had saluted him, but as the priest approached, he put a finger to his lips and disappeared among the trees. It was the eve of his departure for Africa.

For six years in that burning land, he gave his love and his aid. And everything around him, man and nature, prospered and bore fruit. He built, he cleared, he planted: great level green fields spread out on the edge of the forests. Broad straight avenues cut through the horizons. With hazel-switches from his own country he had found springs, and the water flowed. In the name of Christ he meted out justice. He grew darker, more anæmic, more tired—and ever more joyful. His rough soldier neighbours respected him and admired him. In his mud-walled mission, they received as warm and courteous a welcome as might have been offered them by some great house in Normandy. . . .

Six years. . . . Two officers of the Spahis learned that

he was ill, and set out to visit him. But as they advanced along the roads they overtook many negroes who had heard of his illness and were on their way to him, running. Farther on, it was whole groups of people, hastening the same way. And when they were quite close to the mission, the church bell clanged, and a melancholy tom-tom echoed it. A weeping crowd filled the village streets.

He was dead. Immensely tall, he seemed, in his old cassock, as he lay on the little bed that was too short for him. He smiled. Upon his breast a bronze crucifix had been placed, and, strange to tell, he was holding in his clasped hands a tiny white flag, no bigger than a lily petal. It had been found in his cupboard, near the wafers awaiting consecration.

And when, a good while later, the news reached Normandy, they pitied him, criticized him too, and laughed a little. 'Poor Gaston, he had more buttons on his face than on his cassock!' Others there were who thought, 'He went out there so that he could ride a horse.' Others again, more sensitive, but still unable to pierce this mystery, pronounced him a renegade.

But what did the world's thoughts matter to Gaston de La Bare? He had broken his lineage; but even so—and perhaps in spite of himself—had he not died like a Norman aristocrat? . . .

. . . in his conquest, and his dreams?